DERRY'S PARTNER

HUBERT EVANS

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MAC AND DERRY BARKED FOR HIM TO TURN BACK
AND SHOOT THE COMMON ENEMY

DERRY'S PARTNER

BY

HUBERT EVANS

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"Derry—Airedale of the Frontier"

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DERRY'S PARTNER

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST WHITE MAN

EVEN before Ed Sibley left the squalid Indian tents half a mile up the river valley from where he and his two partners were working, he knew that the thing he contemplated was unwise. By the time he rounded the last turn of the trail and saw the flicker of firelight on their tent, he realized that his plan would be not only foolish, but unfair to these two older men with whom he shared the rough living of that mountain valley.

With the lowering threat of winter above them, with seven days' difficult travel between them and the settlement, and with the grub supply already running low, it would be folly to keep this gigantic dog, half husky and half Newfoundland. And besides, before they left the Kitamette River, they were faced with at least one more week's work clearing the last of the log jam which they had been sent up the valley to remove.

"The pup's got the appetite of a logger into the bargain," he mused as he stood irresolute in the trail. Ed pushed back his old felt hat and scratched his tousled head. "That's me all over again," he

meditated ruefully. "I think I can get along without that old Derry dog for a month or so—then I get keen on this wallopin' pup. I'll mebbe get myself in wrong tryin' to claim him. In wrong with the boys, in wrong with one of those Indians, and like as not in wrong with Derry when Andy brings him north again. What in thunder'll I do about it?"

When Andy, his former trapping partner, had been made a deputy game warden and sent south to hunt cougars, Ed had yielded to his friend's desire to have the terrier as a hunting partner. But during these last weeks Ed had sorely missed the dauntless Airedale, and more than he himself suspected, it was this temporary separation which had led to his friendship with the dog who had followed him out of the Indian village a quarter of an hour ago.

He looked perplexedly at the huge young cross-breed waiting expectantly on the trail behind him. "Dawg gone you, son," he drawled with a wry grin, "you're getting me into this jackpot. Back there this evening I thought I was going to be sensible—then you cocked your ears and gave me that come-on smile of yours—and I fell for you. Don't mind admitting I fell hard. What you going to do about it?"

Four white stockinged feet pranced and a white and black body crouched in playful questioning.

"Mebbe Dan and old Alec won't climb my frame when they see what I'm up to. Can't have a dog and not feed him. Can't take their share of the grub and give it to you. Guess I best tell you to hit the trail, eh?"

A derisive sound, half growl, half yap, launched an invitation for yet another of those rough and tumble tussles, those mimic battles in which each matched his strength against the other, but which, when the tussle was prolonged, sometimes seemed perilously close to grim reality.

"Forget the comedy," Ed warned. He pretended to be severe but the thump of a bushy tail on the trail side brush mocked his severity. "You think it's all a joke. Wait till you hear those two crusty old partners of mine pile into me. Come up here and tell me what I better do about it."

Ed slapped his mackinaw clad chest invitingly. Suddenly a thick furred body towered out of the gloom and two heavy paws rested on his shoulders. Ed seized a limp ear in each hand and waggled the huge head in gruff good humor.

"You savage devil," he muttered, his voice husky with quick affection. "You like me, don't you? An' yet that old Siwash yonder claims you got all the makings of a man killer."

They stood motionless beneath the sombre thatch

of spruce boughs which formed a cool cathedral arch above the trail. Ed's long legs were braced to hold the ninety pounds of bone and muscle leaning against him. The grinning jaws of the half wild dog were so close to the white youth's throat that with one short lunge the fangs, gleaming so white in the dusk, could have slashed his life out. And yet Ed Sibley, who prided himself that he knew dogs as few men knew them, was not afraid.

Had there been a vestige of fear within him, the dog's sure instinct would have sensed it and then indeed Ed's life would have been in danger. So far, in the two weeks they had known each other, it had been this same supreme confidence of Ed's which had worked some subtle control over the rebellious young cross-breed the Indians knew as Mac.

Often in play about the village they had stood as they were standing now. And it was when the old Indian had seen them thus that he had uttered his blunt warning to the white man who came often to visit them when the day's work on the log jam was over.

"Sometimes him dog, sometimes"—the old man had snapped his fingers significantly—"quick—like that—he go wolf. That time come, you stand like that—he kill you—sure. I think more better you not play with him."

From other natives Ed had heard the story of Mac's tempestuous life in the village. One of their number, a middle aged Indian known as Cultus Joe, much given to mysterious and prolonged hunting trips into the untravelled draws flanking the river, had brought the pup to the village that summer. Rumor had it that Joe had captured it after killing its wolf mother, but the less credulous members of the tribe said he had found it somewhere beyond the range dividing these coast valleys from the more open forests of the upper country. There Indians and whites alike used sled dogs which were different from the narrow chest mongrels of the coast country. Whether stolen, bought, or picked up as a stray, Mac must have come from that more savage sled dog stock.

Hardly had the thick coated stranger been a week in the village before he was in serious trouble. Older dogs of the tribe had at first treated him as a puppy, but in spite of his immaturity he had challenged them. The fang of every dog was against him and his fangs were against every one of them. Even Joe, his reputed owner, was half afraid of him, and only Mac's splendid physique and promise of usefulness for sled work and back packing had prevented his sullen master from putting a bullet through him.

Perhaps the thought of so splendid a creature being killed or being made wild and uncontrollable

through lack of understanding had increased Ed's first desires to have Mac for his own. Even now, as they stood in the shadows beside the mountain river, young Ed Sibley, ever prone to recklessness, found a primitive delight in ignoring the advice of the Indians. He belittled the danger to himself. For if he could read the heart of a dog, here was one that in spite of its savage strain could become a worthy comrade and perhaps a needed ally in those adventures which are ever close to the man who roves dim trails in the shadows of the austere peaks.

Through the brawling undertone of the river he could hear the cross-breed's throaty exhalations of contentment. Resolutely he pushed the dog's forelegs from his shoulders.

"Come along, Mac lad," he said. "Dan and Alec'll have to let you come, that's all. You can bunk in our camp till Cultus Joe turns up. I'll pay him whatever he asks for you. You're too good a dog to spend your life among a pack of inbred malamutes. Grub's scarce, but we'll go fifty-fifty on my share till we're through the mountains on the settlement side."

Mac's wide forehead puckered in bewilderment. He did not understand these words, for at the village gruff orders were the only spoken sounds he had known. And before the village, back in the dim

past of a puppyhood spent in the rugged country of the dividing ranges, there had been no human sounds at all. The droning of the spring winds in the pipe organ of the peaks, the roar of snow fed cataracts and the comforting little sounds of a shadow-filled den when his wild mother had reared him, these had been the only sounds he had known. But, from the first, in the voice of this white youth there had been a quality which held and fascinated him.

So now he followed as Ed made his way through the last of the brush and into the firelight of the camp.

Close beside his new friend he stalked. Then when they were almost to the tent, he stopped, ears flattened, ruff erect and bristling defiantly. For there, squatting a little distance from the two lounging white men, was Cultus Joe, the man he hated more than any other, the man who had taken him from his savage mother.

"This buck here's been waiting for you most an hour, Ed," Dan told him. "Most unsociable lad I ever set eyes on. Won't say a word about what he wants."

"Reckon I know what he's after," Ed replied guardedly. Then to the sullen faced native. "You Cultus Joe, eh?"

"Yaas," the other retorted, coming suddenly to his feet. "You ketchum my dog—"

"I want to buy your dog, you mean," Ed blurted out, aware of the incredulity on the weathered faces of his two partners. "How much you take? Other Indians say you don't get along very well with him. Guess you'll sell him so long's the price is right."

"No sell-um. Him my dog. You keep away. All tam you keep away that Mac dog. You *kumtux?*"

"Oh, I *hiyu kumtux* all right." Ed stopped, disciplining his rising resentment. Was this announcement that he would not sell merely a wile of the Indian's to get a top figure for the cross-breed? Or was he actually going to take Mac with him? Legally Cultus Joe was quite within his rights, but morally—well morally it was a crime for so splendid an animal to be ruined by a man incapable of understanding the dog's fine sensitive nature.

Already Ed's fingers were fumbling at the flap of the buckskin money belt strapped about his waist next to his skin. "Sure, you know I'm keen on him —the other Indians'll have put you wise to that. Go ahead and name your price."

"I no sell. I use um this winter, packing, my trapline." Cultus Joe was openly contemptuous of the offer and by some subtle quality in the words he managed to let Ed and the other two see how little he

thought of a man who would allow sentiment to sway him in a matter of this kind.

Not until then did Ed face the realization that this Indian, whose ways had gained him the enmity of other members of his tribe, was actually going to take the dog away. His fists clenched and he was taking an impulsive step toward the other when old Alec drawled a warning.

"Keep yer shirt on, son. The dog's his property, remember."

His property! Mac, a dog whose nature promised to be as fine even as his own Derry's, the property of anyone incapable of understanding him? Yet he forced himself to face the devastating truth.

"All right, Alec," he agreed, and made himself go to the far side of the fire while the native produced a thong and slipped it over Mac's head. The dog growled ominously while the bond tightened, but because of the club in the Indian's hand, and because of the brutal lessons it had taught him, he dared not resist too violently. Holding back, straining on the thong, he was led out of the circle of firelight and into the gloom beyond.

And that night, after the other two had turned in, Ed Sibley sat long beside the twinkling embers, thinking bitterly of the comradeship there might have been between himself and Derry and this splendid un-

tamed creature of the wilds. It was not until hours had passed and the Great Dipper had swung through a wide arc in its journey around the pole star that he pulled the folds of his eiderdown sleeping bag about him. The river's eternal chorus seemed louder now, once from the lean air far above the clanging, questing call of wild geese drifted down to him. For the first time he was aware of the thwarted, the unattainable in the cry of those restless migrants through the night.

"What I should do is t' keep at that lad till he lets me have the Mac dog," he mused. Then he remembered the surly resolution in the black eyes of Mac's legal master, remembered too the looks Dan and Alec had exchanged when they guessed of his rash plan to take Mac with them.

"Both of 'em figgered only a greenhorn'd try a thing like that, with grub as low as it is," he reflected bitterly.

CHAPTER II

BARRIERS BROKEN

By sun-up next morning, Mac, overburdened with forty pounds of traps slung across his back just behind the shoulders, had been hours upon the trail.

The grey fingers of the dawn were reaching up over the eastward rim of mountains when Cultus Joe had made him get into a canoe at the Indian camp and had come down river. They had landed close to where the white men's tent was pitched, but upon the opposite bank. While the dugout was being cached well above high water mark, the loaded dog had stood on the gravel bar, ears lifted, nose held high, as if to catch some errant scent of the white youth's camp. Then, with a threatening gesture for him to follow, Cultus Joe had struck off through the deep woods.

By the time full daylight had come, man and dog were entering the narrow mouth of a side valley down which a tributary stream flowed swiftly. When they had mounted the rising ground and could see above the tree tops of the flat stretching out below them, the Indian had hunched his heavy pack and grinned exultantly.

Yes, he had fooled them all. He had fooled that

white man who thought he could take his dog away from him. Better still he had fooled his own people. For centuries they had obediently observed the old taboo which forbade any of the tribe to enter this side valley. None of them could know his destination. Soon they would go down river to their winter village and he would be alone. Perhaps they would wonder what had become of him. Perhaps they would think him dead. But in the spring when he returned with a wealth of fur, ah! then he would show them how foolish they had been to shun this place.

Even had he wanted one of them for trapping partner he knew no one would have come. But, thanks to this gigantic dog, he could move his outfit without help from any of them. Often he had been on the verge of shooting the rebellious beast, but he had stayed his hand. Now he was glad, very glad. For without the dog to carry loads for him he would have been sorely hampered in his trapping.

Shouldering his pack, and grunting an order to Mac, he started on up the valley. There was no trail for him to follow for none of his people had ever come even this far into the forbidden place. The carved totem poles of the down river village, reaching like gnarled fingers to clutch at a glorious past, told no history or legend of any of his people with sufficient stubborn courage to ignore the ban which

had been placed on this valley for many, many generations.

Ever since he could remember, old people of the tribe had told of the spirit that brooded here, the spirit that when disturbed took the shape of some gigantic animal or bird to vent its displeasure on the foolhardy. Once, they said, it had been a wolverine, a monster as large as a grizzly. Again it had swooped as a black eagle, the spread of whose wings had been greater than the length of a canoe pole. Even this summer when he had returned with the Mac dog, some of the old *klootchmen* had whispered that the gigantic dog of a breed unknown to them had been whelped within the confines of the tabooed valley.

But Cultus Joe knew better than that. Nor did he let himself believe those old women's tales. He had heard of valleys where the old people said no man must ever go. In the old days before the white man came into the many silent inlets of the broken North Pacific coast, no Indian however brave ever had dared to enter these forbidden places. But he knew of white men who had laughed and gone and returned with a wealth of gold or fur. The white men did right to laugh at the old people. He was a young man and could go where a white man dared to go.

And already on his secret trips during the summer

he had seen signs enough to verify his hopes of finding a country rich in fur. Marten in the heavy timber, mink along the creek, and surely at the top of the valley where the little lake was, there would be flats and beaver meadows. For centuries the fur-bearers had bred here unmolested by the trapper. Here was wealth for the man with courage to stay the winter.

He and the silent pack dog pushed on. It was early afternoon but in the forest the October air was crisp. On his left the creek ran noisily down its broken course from the lake to the big river below. On his right the sidehill rose sharply. Where they went slowly with their heavy packs the light filtered weakly through the evergreen canopy. The grey trunks stood like lichen-spotted columns in some dim deserted hall of giants. There was a frowning disinterest, a vast aloofness about the valley. But if he thought of that it was not for long. The great thought, the thought which had made him dare come here, was uppermost in his mind. He was thinking again of the big potlatch he would give with the money he would make this winter. Next spring his great ambition would swell to glorious reality.

On under the trees they went. Perhaps he would give a chick-a-min potlatch; two dollars, maybe five to every man and woman in the village. Or it might

be a muck-a-muck potlatch; a case of dried fruit or a big wooden box of sweet biscuits to every one of them. When it was over he would have nothing and still be rich. He would make himself a notable of the tribe. As long as he lived he would have an honorable place near the fire of the great council house. He would show these timid ones. No longer would he be Cultus Joe, the Worthless One, but a great man with some new grand name.

Next spring he would make Mac carry his bales of fur to where his cedar dugout canoe was cached at the junction of this creek with the Kitamette. Triumphantly he would course down its swirling waters to where it emptied into the big lake near the split cedar houses of his village. Then at the trading post farther down the lake he would stand in the middle of the trade room and point grandly for the trader to take things for him from the shelves. He would buy until his last dollar was gone. Then would come the potlatch. Wild nights in the great council house, *mesahchie* man and *zinc* men dancing, leaping in the light from the big fire he would keep bright with gallons of precious oulachan oil. When he had given away all he had, his people would talk of that potlatch for many years to come. He would be the envy of them all. They should try in vain to outdo his reckless openhandedness.

Ahead of him now, through the columned trunks of spruce and cedar, a bright patch of sky showed. That was the opening of the lake. He left the high bank and followed by the striving dog came closer to the creek, down into a little flat of willows, vine maple and clump alder. Here the creek slipped smoothly under overhanging branches as it gathered speed for the fast descent down the long valley.

Here in this slower water would be the place for his salmon fence. Of all his preparations for the winter that must be the first, for already the salmon schools were in the big river. This barrier he would build would hold them here while he speared all he needed to smoke and bake for the winter. They and the deer he should get would feed him and the dog until spring. That night he camped at the creek mouth by the lake. There he would build his cabin.

During the next two days Mac was kept tethered in camp while the Indian explored the lake shore, the flat, the lower sidehills, and found that his hopes were sure to be realized. For there was much sign of marten and beaver besides fur of lesser value. But it was disappointing to discover that the deer he had counted on for meat were not here. Perhaps they had already migrated to the coast to escape the wolves which could drag them down when deep snow

came. There was no other big game sign. So now he must rely entirely on the salmon.

The next two days he worked on his barrier in the creek. He had seen how few gravel bars there were in the lake's tributary streams. The salmon would have to spawn along the shallows of the lake where he could not spear them without a canoe. So he must build his barrier well.

He cut hundreds of short poles back in the woods, lashed them into bundles and made Mac drag them to the creek bank. There he sharpened them and drove them in a line into the soft bottom from bank to bank. Below was a shallow pool where the salmon would rest between assaults on the fence. He would spear them easily there. He must take many for trap bait and for the dog. When the stakes were all driven with inch spaces between them he lashed them with cedar bark to poles he laid along their tops. No sockeye salmon could pass that.

He built his cabin to serve as a smokehouse, with an opening along the low ridge and racks below for fish. He selected a long cedar pole and whittled it to tapering smoothness then fitted his spear head to it. It was a good spear with two barbed points which came loose when the fish was pierced and which were held to the pole by short lanyards of halibut line, so

that no matter how the salmon floundered they could not twist the points from their flesh.

The fall rains commenced when he had all in readiness. That would bring the salmon up quickly. His fence was high and would never be carried away as long as he kept the stakes free of the fallen leaves which the current brought to clog the spaces. He was ready for them now. All was going well. Once he reaped his fish harvest he would be safe until spring. What fools the old people were to believe bad legends of so good a trapping ground as this!

When the salmon had passed through the log jam which Ed and the others were clearing from the main river, a school of several hundred turned aside into the bend where the creek came brawling across a riffle of coarse gravel. For several days they hung in the deep water outside its mouth, timid of running the gauntlet of those shallows. Then they started up.

In the creek there were only a few small pools to serve as resting places. The channel was broken by huge boulders worn smooth by the water which had wrestled unavailingly with them for many centuries and by the rubble and sand which scoured them in freshet time. The salmon had to nose into the smooth

chutes between these boulders, struggle to gain the eddy above, rest, then go stubbornly on.

Many male fish headed the school. Already they were taking on their spawning colors of red and livid green. The perfect streamline of their bodies was broken by the narrow hump which comes at mating time. Their jaws were growing longer and showed the sharp hooked teeth, as long and more pointed than a cat's. Following were the weaker males and most of the females already heavy with eggs.

When they entered the creek the water was at its autumn low level. This made their ascent difficult. What at higher water would be smooth slips of water, were narrowed to shallow passages hardly deep enough to give purchase to their fins and powerful tails. In other places where last year's freshets had washed the loose gravel into flat riffles, there was not depth enough to cover their glistening backs. Yet tirelessly they fought on toward the spawning grounds of the lake.

Then with the rain came a welcome swelling of the stream. It was not a freshet, for the flat and the mountain sides above were dry and absorbed most of the rainfall. But there was surplus enough to bring the creek a foot higher in the places where it was constricted between boulders. Even in the shal-

lows they could swim with only the tips of their dorsal fins above the surface.

That rain brought a compelling message to the school. To their searching nostrils the water still had the lake smell, an alluring smell after the long sojourn in the salt water. But with it came scents that told of rain soaked earth, of rivulets trickling into the lake that would soon be noisy water courses furrowing the hills. The rain sent a thrill of restlessness through the school. More and more in the narrow pools they leaped in play. The swollen stream and the excitement of the approaching spawning time urged them to fight quickly onward. Eagerly the advance guard of the school approached the lake and was confronted with the barrier of stakes.

In the morning Cultus Joe saw them and was pleased. Already there were almost enough for his needs. To-morrow he would have twice as many trapped here. To-morrow then, he would start to take all the fish he needed while he worked to make his one great dream come true. He watched them battling below his fence. Once more he tested it, made sure there were no holes for them to find or loose stakes to be crowded aside. He smiled and went back to his new cabin under the trees. If there was a spirit in this valley he was immune from its

resentment. Perhaps it favored him. For had it not shown him prospects of much fur and brought him the salmon he must have?

"*Hiyu* lucky," he drawled to the dog who followed him warily. But neither by lifted ears nor wavering plume of tail did Mac signal he had heard. His distrust of this Indian persisted, and somewhere deep within him the memory of Ed Sibley filled him with a haunting discontent.

Most of the sockeye were still straggled down the creek when a great fish overtook them. His weight was three times that of any sockeye in the school. He had reached the bend in the river with them, but because of his size he could not follow when they entered the shallows. Now since the rains started he was able to recover the distance he had lost. This was a coho salmon, a heavy shouldered male, soon to be in spawning condition and coming up a month before any others of his kind. He was one of those rare giants which unique circumstances occasionally combine to produce in the under-water world. This one weighed twenty pounds or twice as much as a normal full grown coho. He was close to four feet long, and rangy. Few of the sockeye were half his length. That night he and the remainder of the school reached the barrier of stakes.

In the dark while the rain beat its monotonous soft

tattoo on the dying leaves, Mac, prowling the woods alone, was aware of a tremendous struggling at the barrier. The water was churned by the hundreds of fish that milled against its downstream side. They leaped incessantly to scale it. Their bodies thudded solidly against the stakes, were thrown back, and sometimes—so densely did they crowd to find a passage through—a falling fish was held at the surface for an instant by the backs of those below. The males dragged and wrenched at the soft wood with their hooked teeth, shredding its fibrous inner bark to brown ribbons that fluttered and tossed in the beaten water. Others swam hard against the stakes with their noses wedged into the spaces. Often they beat furiously with their tails as they followed the spaces upward until they reared themselves two-thirds above the water. Always they fell back defeated. It was a mad unceasing struggle, long sustained by the insistence to reach the lake which drove them all to frenzy.

Among them the giant coho ranged. Back and forth behind the forefront of battle he swam, searching for the place of the greatest flow of water. When he found it he shot ahead until he struck the fence. He dropped back, then rammed it hard. Then he leaped. The impact of his body sent a tremble along the row of stakes. Again and again he leaped,

always at the same place. On his last leap the cross-pole to which the stakes were lashed struck him heavily above the eyes. He fell limply and drifted on his side back into the pool. Mac's keen eyes detected the drifting white of his exposed under side. He leaned as far as he dared out from the bank and whined hungrily.

In the dark, eager sockeye swam over and under the coho. In the pool were other fish which had been stunned by striking the cross-pole. Two of them lay with their bodies showing against the sand of the bottom out of the dog's reach. Those two would never swim again.

For a time after the coho righted himself he swam once more behind the churning line. Then with the full return of strength a fury seized him. He leaped three times in quick succession, hard and full at the stakes through which the water slipped fastest. With his last leap the cedar bark lashing parted. One stake fell aside, its point remaining in the soft bottom. The point of the other came free. The stake rose lightly, fell softly and lay broadside against the upstream side of the fence.

As if a signal had been flashed to every fish in the school, they crowded to the breach the giant coho had made. Their sensitive sides felt the increased flow there. Below the fence they were a funnel-shaped

fighting mass. In twos and threes they shot through the hole and in a struggling column went quickly into the lake.

At midnight Cultus Joe came from his cabin. The rain still fell and he wanted to be very sure all was well with his fence. Down through the dripping trees he came slowly. The twisting flame from his cedar bark torch waved eerily, shining on the dull mat of sodden leaves before his feet and on the shining arms and fingers of the alder branches.

From the shadows Mac saw him stand on the low bank with the torch held high, shading his eyes and peering into the pool. It was empty! Empty except for the two dead sockeye that lay in a depression on the bottom where the current had rolled them.

He ran up the bank and looked above the fence. A few sockeye were there, only a few, and even they were on their way upstream. Like a black and overhanging wall rose the picture of what this spelled for him. There would be no potlatch in the village in the springtime. He would gain no grand new name, for he could not stay the winter here.

The yellow torchlight showed the hole through the fence. But no sockeye could have broken that. Again he looked into the water above and this time he saw in mid-stream a dark and massive shape. It could not be a sockeye. It could not even be a coho.

What was this great thing that had smashed his barrier and snatched from him his one great dream?

His startled glance showed him the dog, moveless, enigmatical, watching him from the very edge of the wavering circle his torchlight threw. This dog, larger than any ever seen in his village, could it too have been in some way connected with that age old superstition?

"Sometimes an animal, sometimes a bird," the old people had said. "But big, always bigger than birds or animals ever grew." Fish or dog, whichever had brought about his defeat, he could not say for certain. But as he saw the last of the salmon move up stream, his scornful disbelief of the old folks' story deserted him. The spirit of the forbidden valley was real, then, after all, and had returned to defeat the plans of men.

On the drooping willows the fingers of the rain stroked down the bedraggled leaves. He could never be more than Cultus Joe, the Worthless One, for in that soft sound he read his verdict of defeat.

CHAPTER III

PROOF OF THE BREED

Outwardly Cultus Joe was the same dour Indian when he returned to the creek mouth and drew the dugout canoe from its hiding place beneath the drooping boughs of the cedars. But inwardly he had changed much. In his mind the story of the forbidden valley had become something vastly more real than a time worn legend of his people. For him the sinister spirit still brooded there, and had it not been for the shame of it, he would have been openly glad at having left it forever behind him.

As he cast off the covering of cedar bark from the overturned canoe, Mac, weary but unprotesting beneath the weight of traps lashed to his back, stood on the high ground close by and gazed searchingly across the swirling river. Yonder, behind the fringe of scrub timber and immediately down stream from where the river rushed snarling through the breach the white man had made in the log jam, was the youth from whom he had been parted. And as the great dog looked, his ears lifted with eager questioning and his plume of tail moved gently in anticipation of the promised meeting. Then, unexpectedly, he barked.

Cultus Joe started and, following the dog's gaze, saw a figure, dwarfed by distance, clambering over the driftwood at the farther wing of the broken jam. Again Mac's delighted bark of recognition rang out across the hurrying water and dog and Indian saw the khaki-clad figure stand upright and peer in their direction.

A moment later it disappeared into the river-side brush but the Indian knew they had been sighted. Also, recalling Mac's bark, he surmised shrewdly that Ed Sibley would know where to find them that evening. Gruffly ordering the loaded dog to come to him, he launched the dugout and ordered him to clamber in.

Two hours later they were at the site of the Indians' summer camp. But the tribe had gone. Smoke houses and drying racks were bare, the tents had disappeared and only pilfering jays and one sombre raven on the gaunt spire of a dead spruce occupied the place. During his absence the tribe had set out for its winter quarters at the river mouth.

To-morrow, Cultus Joe told himself, he would embark in his canoe and go down to join them. His return would be greatly different than he had planned it, but recalling that tragic night far up the forbidden valley, he counted himself lucky for this chance to see his kind again.

"To-night we stay," the native thought. "Mebbe-so that white man come here."

Hardly had he cooked supper for himself and turned Mac loose to forage among the offal near the smoke houses, when Ed Sibley came swinging along the trail. Ten minutes' terse bargaining and he was on his way to his own camp. And this time Mac went with him. For during those ten impatient minutes Ed had met the price Cultus Joe insisted upon and now the big wilderness dog was his by right of purchase.

With savage joy Ed romped with him as they jogged along the down river trail. "Somehow, I had a hunch I'd set eyes on you again, old son," he laughed, "but I don't mind saying I'd no notion 'twould be so soon as this. It's you and me together now—you an' me and Derry!"

What a team they'd make, he told himself. Derry, the dashing, high spirited Airedale; Mac, more cautious, repressed except at times like this by his inborn wariness, but friendly and staunch in spite of his seeming aloofness. Yes, here were dogs any man might be proud to have as comrades, a pair he would not trade for any two dogs in all the North. And they were his, not by mere right of purchase, but by that higher and more lasting right, the right of comradeship.

In spite of the hardships and the arduous life he had led both by circumstance and choice, the boy in Ed Sibley was by no means subdued. As he ran along the trail through the thickening dusk, he shouted, sang uproariously under the sway of the glorious realization. Mac's hoarse bark increased the none too melodious uproar which was thrown back to them by the high wall of timber upon the bank opposite.

Then as they neared the camp, Ed's manner changed. He knew better than to expect these two hardened sourdoughs to share his delight in having accomplished what they had hinted to him would be an unwise thing to do. But he would carry it through somehow he told himself, as he led Mac toward the roaring camp fire.

"Well, I bought that pup from Cultus Joe," he announced. He tried to make his announcement seem off-hand, but, standing in the swaying circle of fire-light with the dog beside him, he felt ill at ease—and under his uneasiness was a suggestion of defiance.

"So I see," Dan commented, and Alec, the older man, nodded. They liked this high-spirited young frontiersman but both knew, as Ed himself knew, that this plan to take the wolf-dog back to the settlement was impracticable. And so, reasonably, with

kindly insistence, they tried to persuade him to abandon it.

Ed tried to be reasonable too. "I'll only take the grub that's coming to me. Mac and me'll rustle for the rest. I got my rifle. So if I want to take the pup along it's my own affair."

The tone which Ed unintentionally put into the sentence, as well as his choice of words, was too much for Alec's patience.

"Your own affair, eh? An' anyhow what good's a rifle with the game all pulled outa the country?" he demanded, bristling. "The Indians know it. They've lit out. Winter may ketch us as it is."

"That's right, Ed," Dan urged. "Better leave him with Joe."

But Ed, his gaze on the husky sitting just inside the edge of shadow with his brush curled across his forepaws, shook his head. "Nope," he stated with sullen finality. "Me and Mac—we'll stick together."

From under his hat brim Alec was glaring at him, angry at such unreasonableness, but Dan, an old-timer whom the years had mellowed, not embittered, interposed. "It's up to you, Ed lad," he said gently, then to relieve the tension he got up and, whistling a quavering wisp of some old song, moved about the fire, replenishing it before they all turned in.

That night Mac slept at the feet of Ed Sibley, the first white man he had ever known. Born that spring in the little known headwater country, until these last few weeks he had known nothing but the harsh rule of a people who, unlike the white men, do not make friends and companions of their dogs. He had lived under the constant threat of club or whip but because his determination was strong and his spirit great he had never cringed. He had met hostility with hostility, he was still untamed and in spite of the Indian's stern punishment he remained, unlike the other village dogs, unbroken. Deep within him glowed the red flame of resentment and each blow, instead of quenching it, made that flame burn more intensely. From the first he had known instinctively that Cultus Joe had feared him.

But, glorious savage that he was, in his veins there flowed the blood of Newfoundland ancestors, and that night during those long hours when he lay before the tent door, that blood pulsed again. The young man who slept so close to him had been the first to stir that long forgotten strain, had romped with him in sheer animal high spirits, had buffeted him in genial fun, and—more vital still—had trusted him.

Even as he lay there he tingled at the remembrance of the touch of those hands on head and shoulder, at the tone of that new voice. Just as his distant fore-

bears, who men said crossed the Atlantic in the high-prowed Viking ships, had shared with far-faring humans the high adventure of a thousand years ago, so now for a brief moment he glimpsed what the comradeship of a man could mean. Then, strange enigma that he was, the vision faded. The embers cooled with thin chiming sounds, minute as if from tiny, jeering bells, the hurrying river song filled his ears and once more he was a creature of the wild.

The three men broke camp that morning. It was weeks since they had come up river under orders from the fishery overseer to clear a log jam which, the Indians reported, was holding the salmon from their headwater spawning reaches. Now that job was done, the river was cleared, and with the threat of deep snow upon them, they planned to lose no time in crossing the Twin Forks Range and getting to their homes in the settlement.

Before full daylight came they were dismantling the camp and Mac, excited by the activity like young dogs the world over, was eager to share in it. His indifference to commands, his passion for nosing into odd corners, brought him whole-hearted rounds of abuse. He cheerily ignored Ed's orders to stand clear when the tent was coming down, his big legs fouled the guy ropes and Dan had to come and untangle him. Then when the tarpaulin was lifted

from the brush beds he fancied he had discovered a mouse nest and set lustily to work to dig it out. He braced his hind legs wide apart and with flashing paws opened a barrage of leaf mould upon Alec's carefully folded blankets.

"Clear out!" Alec shouted but Mac, absorbed in the sport, paused only long enough to turn his head, and with dirt stained face and forehead wrinkled in droll questioning, he gave the owner of the blankets a look of insolent reproof. The look implied that if Alec didn't know a luscious mouse nest when he smelled one, here was a dog who did. Then his head went down and the barrage opened again. For all its touch of humor there was defiance in the action.

"Mac! lay off it!" Ed commanded and, bounding forward, seized Mac by the thick hair of his haunches. He was trying to drag him away when without a vestige of warning, without even a protesting growl such as a full-blooded dog might give, the big head flashed back and Mac's huge jaws closed threateningly on Ed's wrist.

"There! That proves his breed!" Alec cried out, suddenly positive that his distrust of the dog was vindicated. Ed saw him reach for an axe and with one quick look told him not to interfere.

In that angry instant Mac was all wolf and Ed knew that behind those jaws was power enough to

break his wrist bone. He did not try to free himself, did not even look at the imprisoned arm, but letting it lie limp, bent low and looked Mac fairly in the eye. In that look there was neither anger nor any show of fear. Mac's eyes met his for a long defiant moment and then as they were lowered the wolf went out of them. Ed bent lower, forcing the dog to look at him, but Mac would not. His jaws went slack, the open mouth slid slowly aside, and as the big body shifted from him Ed saw that the shoulder muscles were twitching from nervous tension, were quivering under the pain of some fine inward torture.

While the rest of the outfit was being stowed and lashed to the three Yukon packboards Mac lay half hidden in the brush above the river bank and looked drearily across the valley over which storm clouds had settled like a drab ceiling. His eyes were all but shut and in the droop of his ears abject misery showed plainly. Never in the Indian village had he felt pain so cruelly exquisite as this the white man gave him, and yet when the packs were shouldered he knew no hesitation. Neither by word nor gesture did Ed ask him to follow but as the start was made he fell in at Ed's heels and without one lingering, backward look he began that long journey toward a world he had never seen.

That morning, soon after they swung away from the river, the storm clouds settled lower but instead of the threatened snow, rain began to fall. Listlessly, monotonously, it came as the three men trudged southward among the spruce forest's columned trunks. Heads forward and packs hunched high they travelled toward the distant mountains, while in every depression of the forest floor pools of brown-stained water gathered and seeped away in rivulets to swell the rising river or its feeder streams. They made an uncomfortable camp as the dreary day was dying and there, for the second time since Ed bought him, Mac sinned against the code of the mountain trails.

Dan was crouched before the fire cooking supper, the open grub sack beside him, and at his shout Alec and Ed turned from the dry cedar they were felling in time to see Mac bounding out of sight.

"Foxy son-of-a-gun!" Dan yelled to them. "Hadn't hardly laid the bacon down when he grabbed it."

The slab of bacon comprised half their dwindling supply of food and Ed, in consternation, bounded in pursuit. Mac's transgression of that morning concerned Ed alone, but this theft of food would work serious hardship on all—perhaps in the barren divide they must cross it might mean disaster. He heard

Alec crashing through the brush behind him and when, after some moments of frantic scouting, they sighted the big dog, Ed saw that the older man had his revolver drawn.

"Give me my chance first, Alec," he panted.

Ed saw Alec's nod but he knew that if his way failed Alec's grim plan would not. And he realized that with the lives of his partners in jeopardy he had no right to protest against it.

"Mac, come here to me," Ed called evenly, softly, as if supremely confident his command would be obeyed. The dog on the far side of the small opening raised his head from tearing at the meat beneath his paws.

In the village the big cross-breed had learned that a dog must either starve or get its food by cunning and at the call of the man it snatched up the bacon, ready to jump out of sight.

That sure voice made him hesitate. But the taunt of the little demons of hunger was strong, the taste of the stolen meat was savory and Mac began to turn away, his tail curved low like the brush of a retreating wolf.

"Mac! Mac boy, come along to me." There was dire urgency beneath the unhurried words for abreast of him Ed saw the blunt revolver barrel come steadily down and stop when the aim was true. He knew that

if Mac retreated farther there would be a thundering crack, a rapier of fire would stab the dusk and as the echoes of Alec's shot died away there would die with them the dream of comradeship he cherished.

"You and me and Derry together!" he had said. But now—how could that be?

Ed understood that to shout, to even let a note of sharpness come into his words would spell defeat. Again—and then again—he made himself call softly to the hesitating cross-breed.

Almost imperceptibly Mac's pose was altered by those repeated words. Perplexity showed in his eloquent face. Once he looked away as if determined to forget the allure of that low voice, then turned again as if compelled by some force he could neither combat nor understand. His paws shifted on the sodden moss then, with senses troubled and a-tingle by the voice's vibrant lure, he moved inch by inch toward the waiting man. Now his tail hung limp and in his eyes was that shame which had clouded them when he had seized Ed's wrist.

"Come along," Ed repeated and this time there was triumph and vast relief in his voice, for as he spoke he saw the revolver barrel go down.

So Mac came on, the bacon in his mouth, his long-jowled muzzle close to earth, submissive to the rain of blows which must surely fall. Only instead of

blows there was a hand placed firmly on his head and at the touch he trembled under the spell of some sensation which was half fear, half adoration.

"Now then, take it back where you got it—take it to Dan," Ed said and led the culprit into camp. He stood and pointed across the fire. "Give it back to Dan," he said again.

Mac understood the order. He glanced toward the man from whom he had stolen and then pleadingly, as if asking for intervention, he looked up at his new master.

"What you know about that!" Dan whispered. "He savvys all right. He's askin' if I'll beat him. Come here with it, I'll let you off. You ain't my dog."

"He's lucky he ain't mine," Alec muttered, his eyes on the mangled bacon. As he was speaking Mac circled wide of the fire, sidled toward Dan and dropped the meat.

That night Mac avoided the three men as carefully as if they had beaten him. Reluctantly, almost fearfully, he was coming to understand that this uncanny human power which was born of kindness could compel obedience where blows could not. Physical punishment his sturdy body could endure, but because his heart was the great heart of a dog he could find no defence against this human control

which not only made him obey but also undermined his very desire to disobey. And yet because he was half wild he wanted to fight against the thing that held him. Morning found him sober and seemingly aloof.

"Not nursing a grouch, are you, mister?" Ed chided him as they were about to put on their packs.

Mac's tail waved slightly and his eyes were troubled, yet when Ed slapped his chest the big dog turned suddenly and leaped up on him.

"You'll pull that trick once too often," Alec warned. "Y'kin see he ain't forgotten about last night. If he nailed you now you wouldn't have the chance of a jack rabbit."

"It's me's taking the chance," Ed retorted.

"Sure, sure. But I hate seeing any man makin' a fool of hisself over a no good Siwash hound."

"Well, boys, time we was hittin' the trail," Dan interposed with a brave show of cheeriness, and Ed, pushing Mac from him, got into his pack straps.

It was a silent trio which trudged southward that long morning. The constant drip of the teeming rain, the sodden squelch of mould and saturated moss beneath their boots made the forest seem a depressing, lifeless place. Ed, brooding on Alec's hostility, heartily wished the trip were over.

"He's got it in for the pup," Ed thought. "He

ain't willing to let him have an even break." Then a secret doubt assailed him and, glimpsing the wet coat of the dog behind him, he wondered if after all his insistence on bringing Mac had been worth the ill-feeling it had caused.

Late that afternoon they reached Grizzly Creek, but the footlog on which they had crossed it almost a month before had been washed away and they were confronted with a channel a hundred feet wide—a ragged sluiceway down which the freshet raged between the overhanging evergreens.

"Sure is boomin'," Alec said moodily. "Either we got to find another footlog or get hung up while we fall one."

"Let's work upstream a ways," Dan suggested, and with Ed in the lead they struck off up the bank.

Mac bounded ahead, looked back to make sure they were following and started off upstream. Months of experience along his vicious home river combined with his Newfoundland strain to make him a superb water dog. But as he followed the lashing course of Grizzly Creek he kept well back from the raw cut-bank, understanding what little chance any animal would have in those racing waters. From deep in the torn creek bed came the water-smothered groan and crunch of rolling boulders, and when at the second bend he came to a log jam through which the creek surged and

spouted, he stopped and waited for the men. He saw Ed's head and shoulders coming slowly above the tips of the dripping brush and when they caught up with him he led the way around the bend until they reached a place where a newly fallen spruce spanned the creek.

"Watch your step, boys," Ed called and with the two men close behind him and Mac ahead they began warily to cross. The log sloped gradually down to where its shattered top had lodged against the boulders of the farther bank. On its upstream side the current folded back, white and snarling.

They were almost midway on the log when suddenly Mac bunched his feet, balanced precariously and confronted Ed.

"Mush!" Ed shouted and, raising his foot, was about to push him on when in alarm he read the light of desperate purpose in Mac's eyes. Ed took one step ahead, saw the keen fangs bared in warning and stopped dead.

"Back up!" Alec yelled, "he's layin' for you!" And with the words a thought flashed across Ed's mind that the dog under the guise of friendliness had waited with diabolical craftiness for such a chance as this. Then suddenly he felt what Mac's paws had already felt—the slow rending of wood fibre, the groan of a log bent past the breaking point. Even

as the log began to sag downstream he spun about and tried to follow Alec and Dan to the bank.

As he ran, swayed and poised, the torrent leaped to overpower him. The log lurched, turned half over, then straightened like a whiplash. With one ghastly roll it was torn free and a ragged row of boughs reared out of the water like dripping arms to beat him under.

Ed knew he could not make the shore and struggled to free himself from the pack's deadly weight. He failed, clutched wildly and was carried under. The sickening vibration of the pounding water was in his ears but, knowing if he was to leave the creek alive he must get clear of the pack, he fought the clinging straps. When he came up he was free—he was being swept straight into the jam's deadly sieve—and beside him, shoulder to shoulder, swam the dog which had vainly tried to warn him from disaster.

Once a backwash whirled them shoreward. Mac could have gained the bank, yet Ed saw him deliberately turn back and with muzzle low and ears flat come loyally out to him again. Then they were into the smother at the face of the jam. A dozen lashing whirlpools tried to suck Ed under. He turned, clutched the slippery log that smote him in the chest and felt his grip slipping when teeth seized

his collar and Mac with every ounce of strength held him precariously against the drag of the sucking death trap. Once they slipped and Mac, with great neck arched, tugged savagely and lifted Ed's chin above the surface again. Then blurred forms clambered onto the jam, hands pulled him free and Mac, with a surging leap, sprang clear.

That night the depressing rain still fell. But to Ed their camp on Grizzly Creek was a splendid, cheering place. For it was there that Alec spoke the words which burned like a warm light in Ed's heart.

"Son, that Mac dog's *nika tillicum* now," he said. And Ed looking at the splendid head nodding in the firelight, felt the lasting truth of that uncouth Chinook phrase—felt that beyond doubt Mac was now a member of the frontier clan.

CHAPTER IV

AN OUTCAST CONQUERS

Once they crossed the summit above the headwaters of Grizzly Creek, the trio were confident of reaching the settlement without any more privation than would be met with ordinarily in mountain travel at that uncertain season of the year.

True, the cold rain swept down upon them in frequent squalls. No woodsman's clothing could long withstand the penetrating moisture, and long before noon they were soaked to the skin. But so long as they kept going—"kept steam up" as Alec put it—they could keep warm. And after they were into the timber on the Twin Forks side of the divide they found better camping places. Places where rock bluffs or thickets sheltered them and where dry, hot firewood was plentiful.

So with Mac circling to right and left of their line of march on short hunting excursions of his own, they came down to where the draw they had been following widened into a deep valley, flanked on one side by Saddle Mountain.

It was on the steep slopes of this monarch of the Twin Fork Range that Ed had stalked Black Spike,

the Rocky Mountain goat, in late September, at the very commencement of the hunting season. With the Coast City sportsman he had been guiding, Ed had climbed the mountain in the hope of getting within range of the leader said to possess the finest pair of horns in that part of the country. But though they made several careful trips over the feeding places on old avalanche courses and on the upper rock ledges Black Spike had eluded them.

It was not until the night they made camp at the base of Saddle Mountain that Ed learned that Alec at least, did not regard the hunt as a failure. And as he realized what was in the old-timer's mind, Ed was surprised, incredulous,—then angry.

"Pretty foxy, for a young fella," Alec had jested with a wink at Dan. "Good way, that was, to get your city sportsman back next season for another try at the old billy. You're coming on fast,—scheming to get another season's work outa him."

"I'd 'a' got him Black Spike if I could," Ed had insisted with frank honesty.

Alec laughed. "You'll do, boy, you'll do. Only, don't try to make that stick with me. You're among friends here. Don't try running a sandy on us. That's a game guides have worked before. Let a hunter get a decent bag then wind up the trip with a big head that gets away. Good bait that is. Now

he'll show up at the Forks next year—rarin' for another try."

Young Sibley refrained from making further denial, but that night as he lay in his blankets he smarted under the joking accusation. "I did the best guiding I knew how," he assured himself. "It's only natural that hunter'll want another try for Black Spike. I'll need that work next season, that's sure enough, but if I take it, Alec and some more of them'll think for sure I was double crossing all the time."

Besides, the doubt cast upon his hunting skill nettled him. Before he went to sleep he pondered upon what he should do. If he permitted this story to go the rounds among the old hands in Twin Forks there was no telling where it would end. His reputation was being questioned.

"I'll show 'em," he decided. And next morning, while breakfast was being prepared, he told them of his decision.

"When we get to Strathey's cabin, a few miles down the creek, reckon I'll drop behind. I'm staying in the valley for mebbe a coupla weeks. Strathey'll sell me what grub I need. An' chances of snafflin' a deer should be good below here."

"What's the big idea?" Dan wanted to know.

"Nothing. Only if Alec here thinks I let that

goat get away so that Coast City guy'll come back next year and ask me to hire out as guide with him, he's got another think coming, that's all. I tried my best, like I said last night. Now I'm out for another try. And this time I don't fall down on the job, either. There won't be any Black Spike to draw that lad here next fall."

"No. And why?" Alec cut in.

"Because I'm out to get him on my own hook, that's why. Give me two weeks. I'll prance into the Comet and show you the finest pair of billy horns you ever set eyes on. An' they'll be mine to keep, what's more."

"Go to it, son, if you feel that way. Only you don't need to take my kiddin' too seriously."

"Mebbe I don't, but leastways I'm for letting you two go on into the Forks ahead of me. I'm giving nobody a chance to have the laugh on me."

Thus it happened that, after leaving them at Strathey's cabin at noon that day, Ed and Mac back-trailed up the valley the following afternoon. Their destination was the side valley walled in to the northward by Saddle Mountain. Where the ground sloped up into this tributary valley Ed stopped and laid down his Yukon packboard with the grub and snowshoes he had purchased from the prospector. Facing him was Saddle Mountain and though he

could not know it then, in the deep valley and on the rugged sidehills flanking its farther side, there had already commenced a gripping conflict which would present his problems starkly to him. Sometimes grim, sometimes poignant, in the days which were to follow he should see that silent drama of the unchartered places, and because he himself was a rover of the wilderness he should share its fighting climax.

With Mac in the lead, he was shouldering his load again when he noted the formless clouds of grey which were thickening on Thunder Mountain. Already it was snowing there. The air was raw and biting and he knew that soon snow would fall in the valley as well. "Looks like a bad storm," he thought and started on, hoping to reach his destination before it overtook him.

On Saddle Mountain the snow fell all that night. Through the motionless air it came, a monotonous curtain of listless flakes idling downward against a background of cold grey. Hour after hour the flakes raised their rounded cones on heather clumps, on the heads of boulders and upturned slabs of granite. Far below on the side-hill, the spired evergreen tops bowed under their oppressing loads of white. It fell with a sibilant murmur keyed almost too finely for human ears to hear—a swishing whisper of triumph at the sure victory of winter. With the

dawn it stopped. But the goats knew this was only a brief respite from the storm.

The clouds lifted and rested on the topmost peaks. For the band it was a warning to tarry no longer among the avalanche courses, the cliffs and the sloping heather meadows which they had ranged since the spring. Saddle Mountain gave bountiful forage in summer but because the feed was high up, the winter snows buried it too deeply. It would soon be barren and they must start along the range and then across a deep valley to the great cave and lower bluffs of southern sidehills where their band had wintered for many years. To stay here meant famine, the desolate famine that stalks the altitudes.

The band had spent the night in the security of the narrow ledges which ran like interwoven scars across the face of the six-hundred-foot bluff. From their resting places they could look down that uneven wall to the bottom of a vertical ravine, or chimney, weathered into the sheer side of the mountain.

While the light of tardy dawn still cloaked their rugged world, and while the valley below, where the young hunter was camped, was still an unfathomed abyss in the dull sea of grey, the goats began to move. They zig-zagged their way up the ledges to the smooth slope above the cliff where only the tips of the tallest heather pricked through the ever thickening

blanket of white. As they climbed their shuffling feet dislodged overhanging combs of snow, their woolly flanks tipped it from the ground hemlock branches and sent it in trailing clouds which sifted and vanished in the motionless air.

They stood shoulder high in the new snow against which their jet black horns and dark eyes stood out startlingly clear. There were eleven adults and four kids in the band. Two others had been born that spring on Saddle Mountain but had been slaughtered by the lone wolf which surprised their mothers among the mountain ash at the bottom of an avalanche channel. This time the band was rallying with fewer offspring then in many years.

This morning they did not scatter to forage. The young males, and the nannies with their well grown kids, stood waiting for their leader to move off along the range and take them to their wintering grounds. They would travel high, keeping well above the valleys which were foreign to them.

Weaklings and the aged could not make that migration. Hard travel would cull them from the band and only the prime and well-conditioned could survive. This was nature's test, this was the way she weeded out the unfit and kept the band healthy and strong. And this year there was one who would not follow when the start was made.

then the next in turn stood out against the lowering sky and then was gone. The trampled track was empty now and Black Spike was left alone. For a long time he watched the notch in the skyline which the deep trail made high above him. Then the snow began to fall again.

During the morning he moved down the mountain side to feed on the tips of slide alder and mountain ash which still showed. At noon the sun shone wanly through the lifted storm haze and from where he stood Black Spike could see into the valley bottom, two thousand feet below. On its northern side, which on clear days caught the brief sunlight, there was better feeding but between him and it lay that hostile strip of forest and open caribou meadow. Once safely across that strip of alien lower world he could survive the winter. There was food enough on the far slopes but the altitudes were his home and only dire need would make him attempt that perilous crossing.

As he stood with feet bunched and hulking shoulders high, far below him he saw a grey form come from the edge of the evergreens. It loped the length of a meadow and then was hidden once more by the dark trees. But Black Spike had recognized this enemy and the coarse wool on his shoulders rose like the hair of an angry dog.

That evening a keen north wind cleared the storm haze from the sky. The stars came out and throbbed in the intense cold and Black Spike found a bed beneath the stunted hemlock growing at the base of his bluff. The night was still, sealed with that negative silence which in the dead of winter can transform the high places into mountains on some dead planet where sounds cannot be made, a silence which dispassionately ignores all living things. Then, hours before the fumbling fingers of the dawn reached above the southeastern rim, there quavered upward to the peaks a sound whose wavering, swelling notes gave voice to the ruthless desolation—a sound which the old goat knew was the hunger call of the wolf he had sighted the afternoon before.

Black Spike rose uneasily. His big hoofs stamped defiance and again the hair on his shoulders bristled. He turned and in the darkness went slowly to a snow draped ledge where no four-footed thing, except others of his kind, could follow him. Dawn found him resting there and soon afterward he started down the mountain to seek the food he must have.

In the forenoon while he browsed methodically at the edge of a buttress of tumbled rock between the avalanche courses, a pair of ptarmigan—those snow white grouse of the altitudes—rocketed past him. He saw them circle and alight on the snow five hun-

dred feet below him. Immediately they began to feed on the hard buds of protruding twig tips.

No human vision could have found them, but in spite of their protective coloring his old eyes located them each time he left off grazing and looked down. Then while he watched, he saw that long grey shape slinking upon them from the cover of a thicket. One bird rose steeply and whirred away but the wolf had pinned the other down in one low, sure leap. The old goat watched as the victim was devoured and when the wolf trotted out of his sight he sensed how speedily his fate would overtake him if hunger should drive him off the mountain.

Then two hours after the wolf had feasted and gone, the deposed leader of the Saddle Mountain herd saw the arch enemy he had so craftily eluded during the October hunting season. Black Spike watched while Ed Sibley left the fringe of timber and trudged across the meadow to the wolf tracks. He saw him follow to where the ptarmigan had been killed, then saw him straighten and scan the meadows beyond, shading his eyes with his mittened hand. For the young hunter as well as for the deposed monarch of the crags there was a sinister threat in those great tracks of the fanged marauder.

That night the stars were curtained behind a thickening scud of cloud and that night from some-

where down the valley the grey pirate sent his desolate, long drawn call. At dawn the blizzard swooped and for two days the old goat took shelter under the hemlock boughs below the cliffs. During those two fierce days and nights, the snowshoe rabbits, grouse, almost all living things were, like Black Spike, storm stayed. While the blizzard raged the lone timber wolf was the only creature in the valley who roved in search of food.

When at last the storm lifted, the mountain sides sweeping to the bottom of the valley were unbroken curves of white. No edible twig tip broke their smoothness and Black Spike, as he descended hungrily, learned that he must starve or enter the country of the enemy. Even as he started unwillingly down he saw a straight line of dotted snow across the meadow which warned him that the grey killer already ranged the desolation. He stopped, but not for long; safe though he was in his towering fortress of crags, the insistent hunger which the storm had brought left him no choice but to venture out into the country of his besieger.

The last act of the grim drama of survival was drawing to its climax. A mile away, tediously breaking trail through the deep snow, Ed Sibley saw the tracks and ordering Mac to stay close, followed on.

But Ed's resolve to rid the valley of the grey

marauder came too late to keep Black Spike from overwhelming danger. When the giant wolf came upon Black Spike's tracks near the first meadow he knew at once what he had found. With head sunk low between his sinewy shoulders and curved tail almost dusting the snow, he paralleled that deep trail until he sighted Black Spike pawing the snow from the buried branches of a mountain ash. He trotted easily ahead, then circled and when he saw him the old monarch snorted and wheeled sharply. With head down and hulking forequarters set and ready he was prepared for an instant change of front.

It was a long moment before either of them moved. There on that glaring stage of snow, with the high wall of Saddle Mountain for a back drop and the ragged evergreens for wings, they made a graphic tableau of the endless battle of the wilds. Then the wolf moved—sidled—and started to close.

It feigned and like a flash the old goat wheeled and dropped his head. The wolf came recklessly on, cut aside and charged past within six inches of the black horns that stabbed at him. Before he could face about the wolf dived for his haunch, slashed him and leaped clear before he could strike.

As he turned, one of Black Spike's forelegs broke through the trail, was held above the knee by the buried branches of the thicket. He lurched, stumbled

and as if this was the chance he had been waiting for, the wolf leaped hard and sure for his unprotected throat.

But even as he staggered, Black Spike hooked viciously. There was a startled snarl of pain as blood seeped from the two dagger wounds across the hide of his ruffled chest, but the frenzy of the kill would not let him relax the fatal hold he had gained across Black Spike's throat.

They were wallowing in the trampled circle their frenzied efforts made. Now the grey form was uppermost and now the white shoulders of the monarch of the range reared up, all but lifting his enemy clear of the ground in his struggles to get clear. But at each twist of his stout neck the fangs went deeper. He was staggering now, his breath whistling through his constricted throat. He tried to rear up and strike with his front hoofs but the wolf dragged him mercilessly down. He swayed, fell and was rolling in one last effort to free himself when close behind him a rifle shot cracked out and, even before he saw the man, the wolf went limp and crumpled with its body half across his own.

Black Spike threw it off and turned to face this second foe. There, still panting from his sprint across the meadow, stood Ed Sibley. Flight was useless now for the man was only twenty feet from

him. Black Spike gave one swift glance up at the mountain where he had ruled so long. All his life he had been a fighter among the crags he knew so well. Now he would fight on foreign ground and go down battling to the last.

The old goat could not read the admiration in Ed's eyes, but when he saw him backing away he learned there was to be no second attack on him. As if dazed by this unlooked-for move, Black Spike still stood ready for the expected assault. But when he saw Ed Sibley and the dog come to the timber across the meadow he understood he could go unmolested.

Ed watched him leave the flat ground and start to climb. He saw him moving stolidly past the wall of tumbled rock, saw him go on, reach his cliff and climb sure-footedly along the first ledge. Then, where the ledge turned, he stood in silhouette against the dark wall of the higher crags beyond. Secure in his fortress now, Black Spike looked down into the feeding ground which was to be his without danger from the grey pirate he had fought so valiantly.

Far below Ed Sibley raised his arm in the frontier signal of farewell.

So in the great silence of the wilderness the truce was made and next week when Ed Sibley said he would not hunt on Saddle Mountain the skeptics in the settlement knew it was a vow that would be kept.

CHAPTER V

NEWS OF DERRY

THE settlement of Twin Forks was in the grip of winter by the time Ed Sibley and his new dog reached it. For the roving youth the Forks meant home, but for Mac, a stranger to the abodes of white men, it was foreign country.

From the first hilarious greetings to the long evenings spent in the shabby little office of the Comet garage, Ed enjoyed to the full this contact with civilization after two months in the rugged Kitamette country. The Comet office was almost as much Ed's home as his aunt's house on the straggling roadway dignified by the name of Balsam Street.

The Comet and its hangers-on was typical of such frontier settlements as Twin Forks. Years ago, Colonel Dempster, ex-soldier and originator of some of the Forks' most biting wit, had said that there was more angling done and more game shot in the office of the Comet than on all the trout streams and hunting grounds of the valley. For it was here on sunny days and long evenings that the group of veteran sportsmen and old-timers gathered to swap yarns, to talk of glorious days gone by or listen with

kindly reserve to the stories told by more active members of the great brotherhood of outdoor men.

It was in the Comet's office that Ed told his story of Black Spike. Here, too, Alec related Mac's heroic effort to save Ed from the log jam on Grizzly Creek. They had nothing but admiration for the huge half wild creature, and though he declined to make friends with any of them, Ed knew that they all liked him. Even little Danny Dundas, the elderly section man on the railroad, who professed an aversion to all dogs, admitted that Mac "had the makin's of a likely looking malamute."

"Hafta get a whale of a lot o' work outa him though, m'boy," he stated with a sagacious wag of his head. "Dogs the likes o' him take a heap o' feedin'."

Ed laughed. "Dogs like Mac don't need much feeding, Danny," he corrected. "They rustle—like that Belinda goat of yours."

Danny's milch goat, Belinda, had been the joke of the settlement that fall. All summer Dundee had declared he was going to buy a goat. "This yere canned milk raises cain with a fella's innards," he had protested. "Goat's milk is mightly nourishin'—an' goats don't cost nothin' to feed. They rustle. Sorta forage long the right-a-way."

This pronouncement had been made in the good weather. With the coming of the snow Belinda refused to rustle her own food and her owner had been forced to import high-priced alfalfa to winter her. The settlement was still jesting Danny over his costly aversion to canned milk.

"Never you mind about Belinda," he told Ed. "She keeps me in milk, anyhow."

"An' Mac and Derry—when Andy brings him north—long with a few likely looking sled dogs I got my eye on, will keep me this winter too," Ed stated.

"Landed that mail job, have yuh?" Sandy Hoskins, the grizzled proprietor of the place, asked. In most things pertaining to the out of doors, Ed was a protégé of his. And it pleased the old man that Ed was to be given the responsible work of running the mail that winter. "What route's Devon goin' to put you on?"

"Oh, it's not settled yet," Ed qualified. "The operator down at the station talked to him at Summit City this morning. If Devon takes me on it'll be between Summit and Quartz Creek. Mebbe two weeks yet before there's an opening."

"Quartz Crick, eh?" Devon commented. That was the hardest route of them all, he knew.

"Heard from Andy since you came in?" Olson, the ferryman, asked. "Him an' Derry's 'bout due back from cougar hunting."

"Yep, I heard all right," Ed told them soberly. "Andy's been sent farther south. Some island down in the Gulf where they been losing a lot of sheep. Had a letter to-day."

"Should 'a' sold him the Airedale and been done with it. When that Andy lad gets t' wandering, there's no holding him. Hard to tell when he'll head back this way again with your dog."

"Won't be long now," Ed insisted, and turned the talk into more pleasant channels.

For the truth was that Ed was longing to see Derry once again. Though he had Mac, no dog on earth could take the place of the Airedale. They had adventured together too much for that. And besides he was more than a little anxious as to the terrier's attitude toward the big dog he had brought out of the headwater country. Would they be friends or foes? he wondered. On that first meeting so much depended for by nature it was impossible for either Mac or Derry to compromise in battle or in friendship. They would be either comrades or enemies to the end.

It was several days after the evening in the Comet office when the talk had turned to dogs, that Ed re-

ceived a letter from Andy which brought back a host of joyous memories of the Airedale.

"Well, old side-kick," Andy wrote, "your Derry dog is sure making a name for himself. I don't mean cougar hunting. He has done that before this. I mean in another way and I will tell you about it before you read the enclosed.

"Early in the fall the pup and me were stationed at a sort of a summer resort place. I got real chummy with a young college fellow who was staying with his aunt. His aunt had one of these half portion spaniels that she mollycoddled to a fare-ye-well. This young fellow (his name is Morton) used to get kinda peeved with his aunt for the way she made a sissy of the spaniel. He kept telling me that this Eustace spaniel would step out if ever he got the chance. He claimed that way back in Eustace's bean was a good healthy germ of rebellion which only needed a chance. Morton and me both being keen on dogs we often talked about it, evenings and such times. Well sir, Morton was right. One day it happened. Eustace stepped out. We got a big laugh out of it before Morton went back to school. Then here this week he sends me the enclosed which he'd written out like a play. I think it's rich. You would too if you knew Eustace. Read it to the bunch at

the Comet some night. I can hear old Sandy cackling over it. After the bunch hears it, shoot me a line and let me know if it was a hit. I told Morton I'd write him how his playwriting went over with a crowd of critical dog experts."

That evening Ed sat on the office table, the lamp at his elbow, his long legs dangling, and with Mac stretched out behind the stove, read:

HAMS

A SPICY COMEDY IN ONE ACT

Characters

EUSTACE (*a matinée idol in revolt*) . . A Spaniel
DERRY (*a dog's dog*) . . . . An Airedale
SNOOPS (*an added distraction*) . A Black Bear Cub
MISTER MULLINS (*who had it coming to him anyway*) . . . . . A Storekeeper
GETTA SOM SING (*a Chinese not so resourceful as his name*) . . . . . A Cook

Voices off Stage, Three Cynical Blue Jays. Electrical Effects, by a hive of bees. These are naturally wild bees, and (naturally) they become more wild as climax approaches.

TIME: *A Sunny Day in early September.*

The entire action takes place at a lake resort and in the pine woods near it. There is a store near the wharf.

SCENE ONE: *As the scene opens,* DERRY *is discovered trotting across the beach. He has just breakfasted at the hunting camp of his temporary master.*

DERRY (*his whiskered face held high as he sniffs the breeze for headlines in the morning's news*): Somebody up wind havin' trout for breakfast—yeh, an' bacon on the side. Lucky dogs. Gee, I'm thirsty. Too much salt in Andy's mush this morning. (*He places his hind feet on a flat boulder, puts his front ones into the water and, his body inclined steeply downward, he defies gravity by drinking.*)

DERRY: Whew! Better'n mush. More character to it. (*Peers into puddle in lee of boulder, sees pollywogs and samples it hopefully.*) Still more character to this. Good as soup, it is.

JAY: (*from the pines*): Haw-haw-hawr!

DERRY (*his forefeet in the soup, glaring*): Keep yer bills outa this, or I'll— Hello! What's up? (*Sees a small reddish spaniel fleeing along beach.*)— Eustace, or I'm a dachshund! Hey! Eustace, Eustace! (*He races after spaniel and overtakes him as he plunges into bushes and peers resentfully up beach.*)

You flop-eared ol' hornswoggler. Haven't seen you in weeks. How's tricks?

EUSTACE (*snorting with impotent wrath*): Tricks! Tricks! Don't talk to me about tricks.

DERRY (*planting his forefeet wide apart and facing his friend with one ear carelessly folded inside out*): Gee, laddie, you're wild-eyed. They'll be muzzling you.

EUSTACE (*still glaring up beach toward his mistress' imposing bungalow*): I don't care. I wish they'd put me in the pound safely away from it all.

DERRY (*touching the spaniel's nose with his own in friendly sympathy*): What's she been doin' to you, laddie?

EUSTACE (*his nostrils twitching*): It's been going on for months. I won't stand it another day. All she can think of is tricks. I have to beg for my supper. If I want a drink she says, "Speak, darling, speak for it." When I ask for a snack 'round tea time she says, "Roll over." She thinks I'm cute. She tried just now to make me say my prayers for my breakfast. Heavens! Why wasn't I born a great Dane?

DERRY (*sitting with head to one side, thinking hard*): Why don't you chaw her rubbers?

EUSTACE (*gulping what is probably a sob*): She washes me with scented soap. I'm not a violet—I'm a

dog, and I want to smell like one. (*Sees a white-clad figure up beach and goes on with melancholy resignation.*) I'm wanted. I'll have to go.

DERRY (*whose unruly mind fails to see the connection*): Let's push off. (*Sees* EUSTACE *is not following and adds disgustedly.*) Anything wrong with your legs?

EUSTACE (*his shoulder muscles twitching nervously as the cook's voice comes down beach to him again*): My legs? Why, no—

DERRY (*snorting*): Then use 'em. You're free now, aren't you? Then let your old lady do the worryin'.

EUSTACE (*aghast but fascinated by the daring suggestion*): Oh—

DERRY: You—I—

GETTA SOM SING (*in distance, with shrill falsetto*): Oostace! Oostace!

DERRY (*gruffly*): Well, what's it to be? More parlor tricks, or a real time with me?

EUSTACE (*with attempted bravado*): I won't go home for an hour.

DERRY: She'll be layin' for you anyway. Might as well make a day of it.

EUSTACE (*sitting down irresolutely*): Oh, I mustn't—

DERRY: Can the Fauntleroy stuff. (*He circles*

artfully, then barges into EUSTACE *and sends him sprawling.*)

EUSTACE (*not displeased by this, the first real play he has known for months*) : You lout!

DERRY (*crouching, chin on paws*) : Come on. Old Miller's got a bear cub. He's a wow. Come on.

EUSTACE: Only a cub—only an innocent baby bear! You should have seen me at the zoo this spring. They have grizzlies there. I barked at them severely through the bars. (*Nettled by* DERRY'S *meaning smirk.*) Oh, that's it! You fancy I'm timid—only a baby bear.

DERRY (*pushing his muzzle into the thick hair of his haunch, as if in search of a flea, but really to muffle his mirth*) : Yeh, only a baby bear. (*Knowing he must find more active diversion or explode.*) Hear those jays? Let's go. Let's put 'em in their place. (*Charges noisily through woods in direction of* MULLINS' *store.*)

EUSTACE (*following, his silken ears flapping*) : So he thinks I'm afraid of an infant like that!

JAYS: Infant? Haw-haw-hawr!

GETTA SOM SING (*in far distance*) : Oostace! Oostace!

DERRY and EUSTACE (*in unison*) : Blah!

SCENE TWO: *As the two dogs trot toward the store,* EUSTACE *is exhilarated by this, his first disobedience in a long, long time. When they discover* MISTER MULLINS *sweeping off the store steps, the spaniel stares impertinently at him,* DERRY'S *head is down as he searches for the fresh tracks of the cub and so he does not notice the storekeeper until* EUSTACE *"woofs" at him with slighting familiarity.*

MULLINS (*whose appreciation of humor—dog or human—has long since gone mouldy*): Clear outa this.

EUSTACE (*smirking and insincerely polite*): Ah, a very good morning to you, Mister Mullins. Some time since I had the pleasure. (*Cocking his soft brown eye at* DERRY.) Crusty as ever, eh?

DERRY (*glancing up from his sleuthing*): Yep. I'm laying for that bird. Kicked me off the wharf yesterday. I was only helping the men unload freight. But he'll keep—we got all summer. Let's locate Snoops. (*He and* EUSTACE *start to move off.*)

MULLINS (*flourishing his broom*): Y' *better* git.

DERRY (*halting instantly*): For two bones I'd razz you all day for that. (*He looks at* EUSTACE, *his muzzle pointing into the breeze.*) Sniff that?

That's Snoops. Say, if I'd a scent as *skookum* as that I'd go out and inhale a dog-catcher.

EUSTACE (*sniffing daintily*): One could certainly call it virile. But it's better than violet soap. (*Barking to* DERRY, *who is already half way across the deserted tennis courts.*) Tell him to wait. Assure him I shan't harm him.

DERRY (*bounding like a rocking horse from sheer impish delight*): You bet I will. (*Plunges into bushes and at once yips that he has located the cub. He turns and watches the spaniel come waddling into the opening where* SNOOPS *has been diligently exploring for ants.*)

EUSTACE (*advancing with a patronizing waggle of tail stub*): And so *this* is Snoops.

SNOOPS (*whose logging camp manners are in strange contrast to his roly-poly appearance*): That's me. Yer dinged ca-hootin'. (*As the condescending* EUSTACE *comes nearer, he sits up, his forepaws dangling innocently.*)

EUSTACE (*snickering*): Oh, look! He's begging for it. And can he say his prayers? Whatever does he want?

DERRY (*with dangling tongue and wickedly expectant eyes*): Step up an' ask him, brother.

EUSTACE: I will. (*He steps forward assuredly, but when he is within reach one of those dangling*

forepaws shoots out with a vicious swipe that fans the air close to the spaniel's nose.)

SNOOPS (*his little eyes watchful*): Listen, fella'. You shoot square wid me an' we'll pull jake. Try any funny stuff and I'll climb yer frame so quick it'll make yer head swim. Get me?

EUSTACE (*still blinking*): Er—why yes, I understand.

DERRY (*swaggering between them*): Eustace and me are old friends, Snoops. Show him a good time.

SNOOPS (*coming onto all fours and stretching his thick neck toward the spaniel*): Sure, sure. Pleased t' meet yuh, fella.

EUSTACE (*after peering cautiously over the cub's shoulder, turning to* DERRY, *perplexedly*): He means that, I suppose? Pardon the personality—but his tail, it isn't, er, wagging.

DERRY (*puckering his brow*): Gee, that's right. Say, he hasn't one! Funny I never missed it. (*Suddenly stiffening and growling a guarded warning.*) Lay low, gang. Somebody coming. (*Head down, he peers through the stalks of the brush.*) Grrr! It's Mullins.

MULLINS: (*off stage*): How'd he get loose in the first place?

GETTA SOM SING: Boss lady say tie 'im up. I get stling. I tie um. Stling bloke. He go—quick.

MULLINS (*peevishly*): What-say?

GETTA SOM SING (*with weary politeness*): Stling bloke. He chew um.

MULLINS: Oh, he chawed the rope. Son-uv-a-gun. Well, he must be somewheres close here. He was with that blasted huntin' Airedale.

The two searchers come closer, they stop directly outside the bushes concealing the opening, and though EUSTACE *does not understand their words, he knows the game is up.*

EUSTACE (*gulping*): Boys, I'm going. The search party—they—

DERRY *glares a warning for silence, but* EUSTACE *starts to slink away when he treads on a brittle twig, it snaps, and at once the men are plunging through the bushes.* DERRY *and* SNOOPS *makes off, but* EUSTACE, *now paralyzed with fright, crouches, rolls with paws in air and beseeches them to spare him.*

MULLINS (*pouncing*): Got you!

EUSTACE (*held aloft by the scruff, finding his voice and yelping shrilly*): Help, Derry! Help!

DERRY (*barking wildly from near the store*): Clamp onto his wrist. Give him what-for. Tie into the big stiff.

GETTA SOM SING: Alite, I take-um now.

MULLINS: No y' don't. (EUSTACE's *mistress is*

one of his best customers.) I'll take him meself. (*To the squirming spaniel.*) Stay quiet or I'll lam yuh good.

EUSTACE (*with noisy pathos*): Derry—they're taking me away. Derry—Derry—Derry! (DERRY *is strangely silent.*)

A minute later MISTER MULLINS *has led the way onto the tennis court. He is about to start along the beach when from the unguarded door of the store, he sees something which causes him to roar mightily, drop* EUSTACE *and charge. During the excitement,* SNOOPS, *always with an eye to the main chance, has lost no time in doing what he has long wanted to. He has invaded the store and traced to its source that alluring meat smell which lingers there. Now, as* MISTER MULLINS *sees him, he has succeeded gloriously—he is making off with the largest ham in the place.*

DERRY (*his ally, rushing about to create a diversion*): Make it slippy, Snoops—he's spotted you.

EUSTACE (*now by necessity an out-and-out rebel, rushing to rejoin the gang*): Hurray! Trip him, Derry, trip him.

MULLINS: Outa my way. Drop it, you devil. Cook, what the blazes yuh lettin' that Spaniel get

away for? Wham! (DERRY, *after a dazzling rush, has sent* MISTER MULLINS *sprawling on the turf.*)

DERRY (*swerving*): Yah. Chuck me off the wharf, would you?

MULLINS (*continuing his chase*): Outa my way!

GETTA SOM SING (*his head cocked pertly to one side, his thin hands clasped across his middle, with Oriental resignation*): Oh, well.

SNOOPS *and the dogs immediately plunge into woods. They know* MISTER MULLINS *is after them but they are relying on the brush to hide them. There is a repressed jubilation about them.* DERRY *is dragging the ham by the cord with the air of a police officer making an important arrest.* SNOOPS *throws his hindquarters ridiculously high at each bound.* EUSTACE *looks more like a real dog than he has in months.*

EUSTACE: We showed them.

DERRY (*as the ham lodges between two roots*): You better come peaceable.

SNOOPS (*whose keen ears have caught a warning*): Shake a leg, you bozos. That scissor-bill's trailing us.

EUSTACE (*trying to appear formidable*): If only you could have seen me tie into him. I made him drop me—

SNOOPS (*not heeding him*): Keep danglin', I'm tellin' yuh.

EUSTACE: I should think he'd had enough—after that lesson I gave him. Why, I— (*He stops, aghast at the sudden discovery that a pair of legs—human legs—are moving just beyond the bushes. Then he screams a warning.*) Run! We're surrounded! RUN!

MULLINS (*confident now of success after his clever flanking movement*): Steal my ham, would yuh? I'll lambaste the daylights outa—

SNOOPS (*fleeing to the nearest tree*): Separate. The game's up.

EUSTACE (*rushing after* SNOOPS, *forgetful of his canine limitations*): That's my tree. I saw it first. (*Pawing the trunk vainly.*) Snoops, help me up. Aw, Snoops—!

DERRY (*mounting guard over the ham with a do-or-die air, blaring his challenge*): Think it's yours, eh? You try an' get it.

MULLINS (*making for him*): Y' imp of perdition, I'll— Ouch! Who throwed that rock? Ouch! I'll kill— wow!— (*He suddenly grabs off his hat and beats the air about him.*) Yarr! (*Leaping as if he had been speared from behind.*) A bees' nest, a bees' nest!

DERRY (*who has not yet interpreted the increasing*

drone of angry sound): Never mind the sparrin', Mullins. Come on— (*He too leaps straight into the air.*) Ki-yi!!!

EUSTACE (*venturing nearer*): Stout fellow, Derry. Stout fell— Help! I'm shot!

MULLINS (*frantically laying about him with his hat*): Gangway! Gangway! (*Like a willing, but stiff-jointed old fire horse, he gallops away, his ham forgotten, his only desire to escape from his aerial attackers.*)

SNOOPS (*backing out of his tree like a short-legged lineman coming down a pole*): Bees' nest, eh? Aw-right, gang. Let me at 'em.

EUSTACE (*rolling over and over*): Help! He's fired the other barrel!

Pandemonium reigns. DERRY *is certain the bees want the ham and refuses to surrender.* EUSTACE *still fancies he is the target for* MULLINS' *shot-gun and darts about in futile panic.* SNOOPS, *who knows about bees, carries the attack to the enemy's citadel. After ten minutes the foe's supply of ammunition has been spent, and the four-footed trio triumph.*

SNOOPS (*dishevelled but genial*): Lead on wid' that ham. I know a place near here where there's

plenty o' good black mud. That'll knock the kick outa them stings.

DERRY (*dragging the ham*): Come along, now.

EUSTACE (*wriggling*): I've never been loose near so much meat in all my life. I feel quite wolfish, don't you know.

DERRY: You're coming on, laddie. I wish your old lady could see you now.

SCENE THREE: *The imposing bungalow belonging to* EUSTACE'S *mistress. It is past noon and several lady guests are gathered on the veranda, ready to go in for luncheon. But* EUSTACE'S *mistress seems worried.*

MISTRESS: I know you'll all adore him. Such a little aristocrat. He won't have a thing to do with ordinary dogs. (*She looks along the beach.*) Oh, I say—what a disreputable trio! Mullins' cub, that ill-mannered Airedale—and some strange little mongrel. I'd be ashamed to allow a dog of mine to go so long without a bath. I always use violet soap on dear Eustace. He adores it. (*She turns her back on the beach.*)

While the ladies chat, the trio come closer along the beach. They are supremely satisfied with themselves, and though their hilarity has

worn off somewhat, DERRY *with his head at a jaunty slant is barking the canine equivalent of "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here." All are plastered with the black mud of* SNOOPS' *wallowing place.* EUSTACE *is a disreputable sight. His coat is matted and tousled as it has never been before. A sting on the bridge of his nose has swollen and given him the expression of a sinful old camel. His bulging flanks indicate that he has had his full share of* MISTER MULLINS' *ham. They come to a slow halt at* EUSTACE'S *gate.*

DERRY (*touching* EUSTACE'S *mud-caked ear with his whiskered muzzle*): Remember what y' said y'd do. Walk right up the steps, give her a dirty look, an' track mud right through the house. Stare her down. Let her see y' mean business. If you get away with it now, you'll be your own boss for keeps. It's now or never, Eustace.

EUSTACE (*whose manners have not improved by association with* SNOOPS): You're blinkin' right I'll do it. See you to-morrow, gang.

SNOOPS and DERRY (*in unison*): Good luck, ol' trapper.

MISTRESS (*to her guests, her back still toward the beach*): And so dainty, I always have the cook put his meat through the chopper. (*Turning to discover*

an unkempt small dog coming purposefully up the steps.) Go away from here, you horrid little tramp. (*Stares, stifles a scream and throws up her hands in horror.*) W-h-y—why, it's Eustace. My darling, what *have* they done to you?

EUSTACE (*with a splendid imitation of* SNOOPS' *uncouthness*): Gangway! (*He starts deliberately for front door.*)

MISTRESS (*in consternation*): You poor, poor dear—

EUSTACE (*staring at her with a stolidness born of over-eating and his new-found independence*): Aw, rats!

MISTRESS (*shocked*): Eustace, treasure—

EUSTACE (*with a pronounced he-man manner*): Lemme alone! Can't y' see when a fella's busy? (*With a last heavy frown, he eyes the ladies and for effect sits back and scratches at a non-existent flea, then exits grandly through open doorway.*)

DERRY (*racing back and forth outside the fence, snatching at sunbeams in his mad delight*): He's done it. Blast his good ol' hide, he's put it over.

SNOOPS (*swinging into a sapling and peering brazenly over the fence*): I knowed he was a real guy. Roughin' it and real vittles'll work wonders.

DERRY (*bursting into discordant song*): Hail, Hail, the—

EUSTACE (*unseen, but triumphant, from back porch*): the gang's all here. See you ginks in the morning.

SNOOPS and DERRY (*together*): Betcha—in the morning.

CURTAIN

Next morning Ed did not wait to write his old partner about the evening's novel entertainment. He had had word from Devon at Summit City to go up and talk over the matter of the mail route, and before he boarded the train he wired Andy as follows:

"The play a hit. Must have been. Even Danny Dundee laughed. Hurry that Derry dog North. Ed."

CHAPTER VI

TREACHERY

Ed was absent from Twin Forks for a full week. He returned eager to tell the Comet crowd the news that ten days hence he was to take over the Quartz Creek run, but he was hardly home again before he heard a rumor that dwarfed his own news and filled him with a strange excitement.

"Come round to the garage late to-night," Sandy Hoskins told him guardedly. "The whole settlement'll know about it soon, but till we get something organized we're keeping it strictly under our hats. Savvy?"

Ed nodded. At nine o'clock that night he called at the cabins of several of the other old-timers. Discreetly they made their way along the darkened street and when they had all filed into the shabby office of the Comet garage, Hoskins, the proprietor, turned the key and pulled down the tattered blinds. Ed with Mac, grave and watchful beside him, sat on the long bench near the door. Both he and the dog were outside the oil lamp's circle of mellow light and Ed was silent while the others, like most old-timers when the excitement of a high moment has cast its spell upon

them, talked of trifling things. They spoke of fur prices, of the blizzard which was raging, but all the while beneath their pose of casualness, their minds dwelt on one thing alone—the furtive summons which had brought them here under cover of the angry night.

Then when old Bert Olson cleared his voice so raucously that Mac's ears lifted in surprise, Ed knew the dallying was over. Olson, his hands suddenly firm on the arms of the barrel chair in which he sat, leaned forward and as if on a signal the meaningless conversation ceased. "Let's git down to business," he said to Hoskins. "Let 'em see the stuff."

Hoskins drew a moosehide bag from his pocket and as his blunt fingers plucked at the thong which bound it, only the sprightly crackle of jack pine in the heater and the angry drone of the blizzard under the eaves interrupted the expectant hush.

From the shadows near the door Ed Sibley watched the weathered faces grouped about the table. He knew that Gil Drummond, Hoskins, Olson and two others had toiled over the Chilcoot on the Eldorado trail of Ninety-eight—fortune had mocked them then, yet now at the sight of that spoonful of dull yellow nuggets those years of vain seeking were forgotten and hope surged up again. Even Berkett, Olson's brawny nephew from the upper country, who

was said to have done some placer mining, leaned forward as eager as the rest.

Ed Sibley smiled quietly. These were the same old sourdoughs who more than once when the rumor of some rich find had fired his imagination had bitterly advised him to keep his head. "For every dollar that comes outa the ground," they had warned him, "two goes into it."

Absently Ed's hand strayed to the head of the dog beside him. "Gold fever," he grinned. "We're due for another epidemic." The massive dog pushed Ed's knee with his muzzle as if he, whose ancestors had drawn the sleds of more than one gold-maddened horde, understood the vainness of the quest.

But during the next half-hour, if Ed Sibley and Mac sat indolent and calm, they were the only ones who did in that shabby rendezvous with fortune. This poke of paydirt had come to Hoskins in an obscure and roundabout way, but gold was gold, they thought they knew its source, others were outfitting to go there and they'd be old fools, they agreed, to dally with such a chance as this.

"It's up to us t' git a lay on Wolverine Creek quick's we can," Olson urged. "None of us old stiffs kin travel fast—but my nevvy here, he's *skookum*. Me an' him's talked it over and he'll stake ground for us—for wages. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

They nodded gravely. In weather like this, through untravelled country, it would be a hard trip.

"What's your time worth?" Drummond asked. Ed detected the anxiety of the question, for Drummond, like most of these old-timers, was a poor man.

"Why," Berkett began pompously, "any mushin' I did in the upper country fetched me ten bucks a day." He was standing now, thumbs hooked inside his soiled leather belt, his canvas coat pushed open so that its sheepskin lining showed. Whether consciously or not, there was a suggestion of swagger in the pose.

The big dog in the gloom beside the door knew that his master had suddenly become alert and watchful. They had shared moments like this when on the trail some half-sensed sight or sound had put them on their guard. And, dog of the wilds that he was, though he himself had received no warning sign, he came swiftly to his feet, noiseless as a cat. His intent, understanding eyes were now on his master's face, now on the group across the room. One of those men there in the lamplight had said something or done something which did not please his master. Again Mac looked at Ed, tried to follow his glance so that he too could mark that man. But Ed's

eyes gave him no clue and in spite of himself a puzzled whine trilled through the silent room.

"What's he hear? Somebody comin'?" Hoskins exclaimed.

"More likely the storm," Berkett volunteered. "Some of them big huskies is naturally nervous."

"Nope. It ain't the storm," Ed said meaningly and leaned forward to stroke the thick fur on his dog's back. As his fingers idled through the clean white and black hair he was thinking rapidly. Did this Berkett think the rest of the old-timers had as much money as Olson? Ten dollars a day—a twenty-day trip, why it would cost them over fifty dollars each to take this long-shot at fortune. To most of them fifty dollars was a lot of money but they'd spend it if they had to starve themselves. He knew the spirit of these staunch old men; they'd been good to him when he was a homeless kid and in spite of the avaricious Berkett they should have their chance.

Mac saw one of Ed's moccasined feet stop its soft tapping on the floor. Then Ed was speaking. "Mushing must pay good in that country you come from, Berkett," he said abruptly, with a crisp cheeriness which veiled a challenge. "I've always had a sort of hankering to set eyes on that Wolverine Crick

—so if the boys here are all willing, I'll take on the staking job—for nothing."

There was an expectant pause. Then before any of the others could speak Berkett did a surprising thing. He came quickly across the room and turning Ed away from the others with a patronizing hand on Sibley's shoulder, he winked and nodded understandingly. "I get you now, Buddy," he whispered. "Nobody tipped me off the bunch was hard up. I had 'em doped out wrong. You're a good guy,—the kind I like to travel with."

"Sibley'n me'll make that trip for you together, boys," he said as he turned toward the others. "I want you to see I'm no piker." He was boisterously genial and as he went back to the table he did not notice the big dog in the corner—the dog who, no longer puzzled, was able to mark his man.

Nor did Ed, half ashamed of the hostility he had felt against this bluff young man, see that the puzzled look in Mac's eyes had given place to one of cold understanding and intentness.

When Man perfected the ornate medium of speech he did so at the expense of the intuition which had served him well when all the world was primitive. So as day followed day and Berkett and Ed Sibley shared the privations of trail and winter camp, Ed's

first doubts of the other's motives faded into obscurity while in the half-wild dog, who did not understand the fine shadings of glib words, that first suspicion strengthened.

"What's the matter with you? Don't be so blinkin' crusty," Ed admonished him with gruff pleasantry one noon when, stopping to make tea, Berkett went a little way off the trail for birch bark to kindle their small fire. "This side-kick of ours is decent enough. Terrible man to talk, but at that he's all right. The way you keep your eye on him makes a feller think he's pinched one of your pet bones or something. Lay off glaring at him."

Mac's ears went limp and his head drooped slightly at the soft rebuke of Ed's voice. A great white foreleg came up and the blunt claws raked Ed's clothing in a harsh gesture which was half play, half fierce affection. He seemed to be mutely saying that whatever else went amiss, his relations with this one man, at least, would never falter. Then seeing Ed's quick grin, Mac feigned at him, leaped clear and, rolling in the dry snow with waving paws, barked an invitation to tussle.

This ninety-pound dog trying to frolic like some puny kitten tickled Ed's sense of the absurd. "You wallopin' heavy villain—trying to clown it," he shouted and dived for Mac in a flying football tackle.

The bodies of both of them were almost hidden in the smother of snow when Berkett came jogging back to the camping place.

"Soak it to him, Mac," he cheered, but Mac, sobering abruptly, got up, braced his legs and shook the snow from his splendid coat. Then with bushy tail curved high he stalked off the trail and sat upright in the cold sunlight of the winter noon, tongue dangling, great mouth open in a sinister, mirthless grin.

All that afternoon they mushed slowly toward the top of the height of land, miles beyond which lay the big river and its tributary Wolverine Creek. Berkett and Ed, each with heavy packs, took turns at breaking trail and Mac, back-packing thirty-pounds of grub, stalked slowly in their rear. The recent blizzard had transformed isolated evergreens into glistening spires of white and between the irregular meadows trees were grouped beneath one grotesque roof of sagging snow. The sun, even now close above the south-western rim, launched its cold shafts down these twisting avenues of white, left sharp-edged, fantastic shadows sprawling eastward from the tree clumps standing like hooded watchers, and filled each depression in the snow surface with ethereal, bluish light. It was a hushed and immobile land, neither vindictive nor friendly, merely serenely

aloof to the three dark figures toiling up its mile-long slopes.

Even the loquacious Berkett was silent under the spell of that splendid isolation. But Mac, treading the packed snow behind him, never kept his eyes for long from the hunched figure of this man whom he distrusted. And late that afternoon when camp was being made in the vaulted shelter of a hemlock clump, Mac learned that his distrust was vindicated.

With Ed he had gone to the far side of the clump behind the silk cruiser's tent before whose open front Berkett was scraping away the snow with one of his shoes to clear a place for the fire. As Ed started back with his armful of wood, Mac bounded into camp, chancing to pass close to his master's pack. As if halted by some sharp word of command, the dog stopped, then circled the pack to sniff the scent which lay fresh and heavy upon it. The next instant with neck low, head out-thrust and ruff rising, he started to close with Berkett.

A low growl, ominous as distant thunder, rumbled from his throat. Like a crafty boxer manœuvring for an opening, he set each paw down carefully. He seemed to glide toward the man who, so his nose told him, had opened that pack and carefully lashed it into place again during the few moments he was alone in camp.

"Ya would, eh?" Berkett rasped in a whisper of consternation. "Back up, you devil, or I'll drill you!" He was fumbling with the flap of his home-made holster when at the crunch of Ed's snowshoes behind the tent, his hands left his belt and his manner was transformed to one of tolerant bewilderment. "Gosh, boy," he began as Ed stepped into sight. "This dog o' yours is getting the distemper or something."

Mac had halted now, but his sinister purpose still showed in the crouch of his body and in his blazing eyes. Amazed, Ed looked at him. It was thus he had seen Mac first, the defiant outlaw among a pack of malamutes at that far-off Indian village on the Kitamette. His Siwash master had declared he could never be broken, had called him a man-killer and because of that rebellious spirit which no clubbing would kill, had been only too glad to sell him for a few dollars. Was this the same Mac who had saved him from a ghastly death a month ago? And would those conflicting instincts of wolf and loyal-hearted dog make him always an enigma—would they mould him into a creature never to be trusted?

Sternly Ed ordered him away. But before he turned to go, Mac's anger found expression in a snap—and the solid clipping sound as tooth met tooth was more threatening than any growl could be.

"Whew!" exclaimed Berkett, grinning weakly as Mac stalked behind the tent. "Thought he was going to nail me sure. Hate to say anything against another man's dog, but I don't trust that boy any more. I'd hate to get crippled when I was on the trail alone and find him standing over me. Never did see a husky that wasn't tricky."

Almost before he had finished speaking, Berkett saw he had made a mistake for Ed, even with the weight of evidence overwhelmingly against him, would not turn against his dog. Tolerant as he had been of Berkett's glib wit, there were bounds beyond which the other should not go unchallenged.

"My dog ain't tricky," Ed blurted out. "Me and Mac stand together. You lay off him, see?"

"Make him lay off me then."

"Mebbe he has reasons. Mebbe you went to hit him or something."

"Never laid a finger on him. But, by Gory! if he tries that game again I'll plug him sure."

"You do and—" Unexpectedly Ed stopped. Often he had heard old-timers joke about what they dubbed the "partner complaint," the bickerings of two men alone in the wilds quarrelling like pouting children over trifles and fancied slights. He wouldn't get down to that, he told himself.

"Forget it, Berkett," he said. "Me and Mac'll

take a walk down the trail and cool off. Might snaffle a rabbit for supper."

"Good idea," Berkett agreed formally. "I'll keep the fire going."

Without waiting to put on his snowshoes, Ed whistled for Mac and started quickly along the trail. When they were well out of sight of camp he stopped, squatted on the packed snow and taking Mac's ears in his mittened hands, waggled his head from side to side with rough affection.

"You old rough-house artist," he chided. "You'll get me into trouble yet."

Straining against the hold on his head, Mac looked across the long meadow beyond whose fringe of timber blue wood smoke was idling upward into the frosty dusk.

"Sure, sure," Ed soothed. "I savvy you don't like him. Can't say I'd choose him for a partner either. That smooth gab o' his gets on my nerves. Pretty near went off the deep end myself when he talked of plugging you. Now let's forget him and go have a *nannich* for the odd rabbit."

Ed drew his long-barrelled, twenty-two calibre pistol from his side pocket. "Sniff the old meal ticket, boy," he told Mac.

But Mac, ears pricked and eyes snapping at the

prospect of a hunt, needed no second look at the worn old weapon to tell him what was wanted. In obedience to Ed's wave he bounded breast deep through the soft snow and started to search the nearest clump of trees. Ed waited in the open across which the loping forms must pass. Mac would not hurry them and, confident of their fleetness in the deep snow, the rabbits often sat and looked back with alert ears as if to tantalize their toiling pursuer. But rabbits were scarce that evening and when approaching night made further hunting impossible they started back to camp.

The last contrasting thread of light and shadow had long been merged into the time worn tapestry of dusk as they headed up the easy slope of the ridge. The dark tree clusters were steep-shored islands; the snow had turned to dim ponds and lakes and ghostly rivers winding past them on and on into the formless sea of night, and from far beyond its unseen shores the ears of Mac and Ed heard the eerie call of coyotes like the maniacal chantey of hunger-maddened castaways. The thin fingers of the night wind were thrumming minor chords upon the evergreens and Ed involuntarily turned up the collar of his mackinaw. Then the reflected light of the fire on the branches above their camp cheered them.

"To heel now," he warned Mac as they approached. "Going to be a snappy night," he called.

No answer came from the gloom inside the tent.

"Sure going to be a cold un," Ed repeated, cheerily determined to ignore their wrangling of an hour ago—doubly determined to meet Berkett more than half way.

Still there was no answer and he was about to give a perplexed "hello" when the unruly Mac bounded past him.

"Out of it!" Ed yelled, fearing that Berkett had fallen asleep. Then his eyes fell on his snowshoes lying almost in the fire. The webbing of both shoes had been slashed from toe to heel-bar. Ed leaped toward the tent. His pack, its contents scattered, was open and in a cleft stick beside it a piece of paper shone wanly. He held it to the blaze and read:

> "So long, Easy Mark. You and your cheap skate friends are out of luck, the best ground on Wolverine will be staked in my name. Don't trail me or you'll get plugged—you and the dog too."

"You had his number, Mac! Of all the double-crossing—" Ed began, then stopped, fascinated by his dog's actions. Like some glutton at a feast Mac moved about pack and snowshoes drinking deep of

the scent which clung to them, sniffing audibly as if he feared he might mistake the identity of the desecrator when the chance for retaliation came. His ruff fell and rose as waves of lustful anger swept him and in his wide-set eyes the red fires of revenge burned.

Ed found his own honest anger fading before this dire display of primitive hate. "Berkett's outa luck if Mac gets the drop on him," Ed thought. "Mac'll jump him sure."

"It ain't so bad as it looks," he said aloud. "I've got spare rawhide tucked inside the packboard and I can splice what he cut. He just dumped the pack —it was the map he wanted. He figgers on striking cross country to the recorder's office at Division. We'll fool him, Mac. We'll be dangling on his heels 'fore long."

The control of Ed's voice seemed to steady the dog, and after he had put the rawhide to soak in the tin pail, Ed read the note again. "Plug us, will he? Not him," Ed mused contemptuously. Like all men of action he disliked the cheaply dramatic and the wording of the note showed Berkett to be that.

Before the fumbling fingers of the dawn felt their way through the eastward barrier of peaks Ed was ready to travel, and when Ed began to pack Mac sprang briskly up.

"Keep your hair on," Ed jested. "He's breaking trail for us, we can't lose out now."

Mac's bushy tail waved slightly. Hours ago he had ceased to growl when the hated scent came to his nostrils. A mood, cold as the night itself, had settled on him. Then he had drowsed and now as he lay down again Ed thought it likely he had forgotten most of his resentment. "Guess he's the kind that doesn't hold his mad for long," he mused.

When at last day began to break Ed shouldered his pack and started. But before he left the camping place he slipped a thong through Mac's collar and made the other end fast to his own waist. "Might come on Berkett sudden," he explained at Mac's whining protest. "An' we don't want to have him add dog shooting to his other petty crimes."

After a few ineffectual tugs Mac settled down, strained steadily on the thong, almost pulling Ed as his claws and broad pads dug into the trail Berkett had broken during his flight of the previous night.

"We can't lose out now," Ed had stated that morning. But by the time he neared the top of the height of land the signs were all too convincing that the man he was pursuing was gaining on him. Berkett was travelling with only the barest essentials in his pack, while Ed clung doggedly to his resolve to abandon none of the outfit. The added weight might slow him

down, but better than Berkett he knew the stern country yet to be faced.

"A man decently outfitted'll have the advantage then," he said to the silent dog. "And like I said, he's still got to break trail for us. We'll close with him—you bet we will."

But that night when they camped among the sparsely wooded ridges on the high ground, even that advantage was taken from him. For, hardly had he made a hurried camp than snow began to fall in a thick curtain of heavy, clogging flakes. Before dawn Ed was astir, but when daylight came he saw all too well that like his opponent, he had to face the heavy toil of trail breaking.

That evening, though faint depressions in the less exposed places assured him that he had managed to follow Berkett, he was far behind. And by then, so far as he could estimate, Berkett must be making good time down into the lake country between the height of land and the big river.

A day and yet another came and waned, and still the grim chase went on.

CHAPTER VII

MORSELS OF CHANCE

WHILE far behind him Ed Sibley plodded on, fearing he had betrayed the trusting old-timers of the Forks, Berkett was straining every nerve to shake off pursuit.

Twice he deviated from the course they had decided on at the commencement of the trip. Yet the fear persisted that the lanky frontiersman and his dog had not been shaken off. Recklessly he abandoned the weightier articles of food he had taken from the camp.

"Won't be the first time I've lived off the country and got away with it," he told himself, trying to justify this dangerous lightening of his load. By the third night his pack was reduced below the minimum for safety. Then while he slept uneasily, some small marauders, either pack rats or flying squirrels, despoiled his few remaining pounds of rice and flour, and he awoke to find himself without food of any kind.

Sudden hysteria seized him. He cursed himself, cursed this youth who somehow had sensed his duplicity and had persuaded the old-timers to make

the staking trip a joint affair. Most of all he blamed the grim-mannered dog who from that first evening had read his crafty thoughts with uncanny precision.

"Yuh'll make 'er yet—keep yer shirt on, blast you," he whispered in exasperation at his fears.

All that day he was on the alert for game of any kind. But in spite of his watchfulness he saw nothing larger than a squirrel. This he shot and wrapped carefully in the gnawed remnants of the flour sack. He camped that night on the shores of a long lake, and next morning started wearily down across the ice, headed for the river beyond which Wolverine Creek was situated.

Far ahead he fancied he could see the black open water of a creek mouth. It seemed miles away, but dully he decided that he must stop there long enough to light a fire and fish. Big trout and char often wintered off such creek mouths. And since he was faced with hunger and there was no prospect of rabbits, grouse or larger game, he must have fish or starve.

With lowered head, he trudged on and on.

In summer the small alders would have made a leafy tunnel over the creek out of whose mouth the foam-speckled water had coiled provocatively into the lake. But now the lake was frozen and, in con-

trast to the monotonous white of winter, the water had blackened to a heavy tongue which licked with futile persistence on the tinkling edges of the ice. The bare alders were weighed down by snow, oppressed by it; like frost-rimmed skeletons of summer's forgotten rearguard, they sprawled where winter had slain them.

Off the creek mouth, below the dull ceiling of the ice, the big char lay close against a sunken log. Except for the slow sweeps of her broad tail and the movements of her white-lined fins she would have seemed a part of the darkness. She was avid for prey, and as she watched, her jaws opened and snapped in a grim gesture of impatience. Winter had imposed its partial truce between hunter and hunted of that under-water world but because of her overwhelming hunger she had scorned it.

Out of the greater gloom of mid-lake, a slight shadow moved close against the ice. Behind it, swimming slowly, came a second, then a third. The old fish saw their slender shapes as they passed above her. Cunning as a cougar creeping to launch itself upon a fawn, she edged from her lair and rose like a drifting bar of shadow to come upon them from behind. There was a sinister certainty in her caution as she slowly shortened the distance between herself and the three young trout. From years of such

stalking she knew she was concealed by the black lake bottom while to her the trout were silhouetted against the wintry sunlight which filtered through the snow and ice, and as she rose unseen by them her jaws spread and shut with the eagerness that tempted her to rashness. Her keen hooked teeth would crunch into one of these fat bodies and her weeks of famine would be over.

When she was two yards from them, her eagerness betrayed her. That quick movement of her jaws had lifted her bony gill covers and spread the yellow-white skin of her throat, so that a shaft of pale light had thrown back a warning glint. A quick flirt of his tail, a twisted rush, and the leading trout spread his signal of alarm.

His first movement told the char she had been seen and with sharp thrusts of her tail she drove herself at them. Her mouth was spread, the membrane of her fins taut with her mad desire for food, her gaunt body undulated as she put all the strength famine had left her into the rush. But as she came up the three trout doubled, dodged and shot away with flippant ease and her head struck the ice and sent her slithering, belly up, along its smooth surface. When she righted herself the three young trout had disappeared.

She cruised close to the ice, sweeping her tail in

sullen anger at her defeat. Then slowly she went down and swung about to parallel the log and watch for other food.

Never, from the year of her maturity until the previous fall, had she missed such easy prey. At other times she had surged upward true as an arrow, maimed her quarry with the first powerful crunch, spat it out, caught it end on and gulped it down. For eight years she had been the lurking menace at the mouth of Alder Creek. On summer evenings she had come from the mellow shadow of her hiding place into the schools of small fish that cut and poised among the swirling eddies. For eight autumns she had moved up the creek and spawned with others of her breed, then come down the creek to feed prodigiously and fatten before the relentless advance of winter.

For months she had brooded beside her log, occasionally rushing out to seize some smaller fish but lying inactive for day after day until the first promptings of returning spring quickened her desire for food. But now she was fourteen years old, her eyes were dimming, her body lean; once her movements had been lusty and unerring, now they were uncertain, sinuous like those of a snake. For many years she had taken heavy toll from generations of

smaller fish but in a few weeks or months there would cease to be a shadowy menace at the mouth of Alder Creek, the lurking place would be empty and smaller fish could pass it unharmed.

The darkness under the ice paled slightly as the sun and its attendant sun-dogs swung to its zenith above the southern rim. It shone weakly on the tangled alders and laid their shadows in a crazy pattern of loops and curves upon the snow. Its unreal light, coming through the high haze of the gathering Northland storm, was reddish-grey and baleful; but for the char it outlined objects between the log and the tongue of open water, giving a limited perspective to what had been a drab, impenetrable wall.

This heightening of light and shadow increased her restlessness; she moved away from the log, turned, passed above it and moved slowly along the sloping bottom toward the creek mouth. As she swam she searched the littered silt for signs of bullheads, sticklebacks, dace, any of the clumsy swimmers that in seasons past had been her easy victims. Once, a yard to her left, a fat bullhead shifted warily to hide its tapering body and wide head close against a slab of sunken bark. She could have caught it readily but she passed on, unseeing.

Ahead something lay in a small open space. Her

tail twisted sideways, her lower fins spread as she slowed to watch it. While she drifted forward she saw it was a sucker, its tapering snout pressed against the yielding bottom, its fan-like pectorals spread to steady it. Her tail swung quickly, her thin body drove forward as she came upon it from behind. Her teeth closed on the rounded back of her drowsing victim. It writhed, rolling her partly over as she clamped its soft body in her jaws.

Their sweeping tails stirred billowing clouds of mud, too dense for the feeble light to penetrate, so that they fought behind a screen where all was hidden except the occasional glimmer of their underparts. But in a moment the big sucker wrenched free, lurched out of the silt cloud and blundered away over the bottom.

Instantly the char appeared. She circled confusedly then, seeing her escaping victim, she raced after him. The sucker doubled and her efforts to follow it were so awkward that before she righted herself it had scurried out of sight. She cruised back toward the silt cloud, then away from the creek mouth into the indistinctness of the lake. In a few minutes she returned defeated to her lair. Even the slow suckers could out-swim her, for nature's dispassionate law which formerly had favored had turned against her now.

Out on the lake, a mile north of the mouth of Alder Creek, a black spot moved. At that distance it seemed a trifling thing, a mere speck on the unused canvas of white framed between the heavy sky and the sides of the mountains flanking the lake. The spot was Berkett mushing eastward.

He came slowly on, the upturned toes of his snowshoes sinking and rising steadily, his muffled body swaying to his gait, his shoulders hunched to support the slight weight of his pack. The sun still peered weakly through the thickening sky but its light was aloof as if those qualities in it which encourage growth—encourage life itself—had been sifted out by that leaden screen of storm haze. Even the hulk of his shadows, following at his snowshoe heels, came on like an unwilling prisoner whose every motion was an ineffectual effort to jerk free and flee to the dimness of the evergreens along the shore where it could cower and hide its shapeless face before the threatening light.

When he was abreast of Alder Creek, the solitary musher stopped to look at the black tongue of water then turned inshore, leaving the ice and weaving his trail into the pattern of the alder clumps until he reached the fringe of evergreens which, with their shapely burdens of snow, seemed to coldly welcome him. He dumped his pack where drooping boughs

had formed a shelter. This was a good place for a fire.

Though he had stopped he retained the sensation of travelling. His tired muscles, the worn mechanisms of his body, were slow to accustom themselves to the change. He knew he was standing and yet his nerves insisted that he was going forward step after step, step after step, as he had been doing almost incessantly for days since he left the Forks. His body seemed to be going away from him, as if the great dissolution against which he had been struggling had suddenly and quietly overtaken him. He could even feel the slight pressure of the air against his face, his chest and thighs; those icy fingers which as he tramped had been always trying to topple him backward to the snow. His arm fumbled out and touched the trunk of the cedar beneath which he stood. The feel of the rough bark reassured him, focused his senses. His gaze fell on his trail through the alders, jumped along it to the lake.

Yes, out there was where he had turned. What had he come here for? A fire? It must have been a fire. Twisting his feet from the lashings, he picked up one of his shoes and started to scoop away the snow.

When he had bared the frozen mat of cedar twigs and moss he took his axe and stepped close to the

tree trunk to cut one of the dry boughs close above his head. If the axe slipped it would end things. He would not let it slip. Like an inexpert chess player pondering the simplest moves, he gauged distances, shifted his moccasined feet, tried to anticipate his slightest movement and its effect. The simple task of cutting a limb had become a difficult problem demanding intense concentration.

When the limb was safely down he raised the axe to chop it. Carefully noting the position of his feet, checking up all other details, he let the blows fall until the limb was split and cut in lengths.

From his canvas pack he took a ball of shredded birch bark and some splinters of pitch pine. He squatted on the ground he had bared, took off his toque, dried his fingers on his tousled hair, then got out the sulphur matches. He broke off one, struck it on the block of others and watched while the colorless flame sputtered into yellow. In a moment the bark and pitch pine were blazing strongly and he laid on the lengths of coarser wood.

The flames were reassuring. It gave him confidence to know he still retained the power to make a fire. It was wonderful, fortifying, to realize that neither those mountains nor the heavy sky nor the wolves that wailed at night, nothing but himself in all these desolate miles, was able to make a fire. He

alone could drive back the insistent cold. As he looked at the miracle he had worked, the compressing circle of mountains, cold, wolves, hunger, widened and he stood separate and apart from them, commanded his identity in the heart of this solitude that kept on trying to dissolve him.

He brought a blackened tin pail from the pack, waded through the soft snow to the creek mouth, filled the pail and placed it on the fire. It was like coming home to wade through all that snow and see the living fire.

His hand went into the pack again and brought out a roll of cotton cloth. That was the sack which once had held his flour. When it was empty he had boiled it to recover the flour dust which had caked upon the cloth. Cautiously he started to open the roll.

Inside were the two remaining shreds of the squirrel. One dropped into the bank of snow and on the instant panic spurted through him. He compelled his fingers to go carefully as he felt for it. He recovered it immediately and pressed the scrap of frozen flesh tight in his palm. It must not drop like that again.

What had he planned to do with those two scraps? He had come here to do something with them. Not to eat them; he must not let himself do that. For

the moment he could not remember. Fumblingly he tried to back-track his trail of thought.

Two or three days' travel to the settlements on Wolverine Creek—the storm would slow him up—two scraps of meat—his weakness—no food. The whole world, everything he saw or touched or thought, was so out of proportion. Like greasy bubbles some swelled, some shrunk, some snapped and were lost—ping! like that. His senses were always tricking him. When he was mushing down the lake the sun-dogs seemed nearer than the shore; one of his arms was numb and bloated, so big it kept teetering him to one side, trying to help the cold fingers of the air to send him sprawling.

He had seen this open water and the cowering alders and he had come here to do something definite. In summer this would be a nice green place and trout would rise in the rippling water. Trout? Ah, that was it. He had been looking for a likely place to fish through the ice, then when he found it another of those bubbles had snapped and he had forgotten why he came.

But now he remembered. All day he had been tricked like this. As soon as he had thought a thing out and stopped concentrating on it it snapped out of reach and he had to torture himself with thought again.

From the pocket of his mackinaw jumper he brought out a small tin tobacco box. In the box were his one fishhook, a hank of twine and some sinkers. He had the two scraps for bait. A fish—a ten-pounder, say—would take him to the settlement.

Get up and go and try for a fish, that was what he had to do now. How much less trouble just to mush on and on, letting his brain stay dull, not having to prod it to the effort of thought. But he must be alert now; no false moves here, everything depended on being sharp and watchful. He put the box and the meat in his pocket, slipped his feet into the snowshoes, picked up the axe. Too bad to leave so good a fire. He wanted to sit beside it and not have to think about fish or gold, or that chap Sibley or his dog.

"Fool—crazy fool," he muttered. "Your last chance, blasted crazy fool." Unsteadily he went out through the crooked alders, making for the ice beyond the outside edge of open water.

The old char lay close against her log. The sucker she had tried to maim had not come back, the three young trout roved elsewhere, and the bullhead she had failed to see had wedged itself under the slab of bark. In the dim waters at the mouth of Alder

Creek no living thing except the famished char lay between the bottom and the ice.

From the direction of the shore faint crunching sounds came down. The char sank closer against the slime-covered log while the sounds advanced slowly. A few bubbles broke from their prison of silt and wavered upward like a string of unshapely pearls. The dull vibrations slowed uncertainly and stopped.

An axe bit into the ice with a muffled clink, testing it, and then the steps drew nearer, crunching and lifting until they were directly above the hiding place at the log. The big fish went lower, confident in the security of shadow.

The footfalls went no farther. After days of failure chance was favoring Berkett, bringing him to the hungry fish. There were sounds of scraping as a snowshoe made a bare spot; the sharp blows of the axe on the sounding board of ice vibrated the unlighted water. Three times the chopping ceased while the chips of ice were pawed from the jagged hole. Then a pale cone of light widened quickly, reached down and dispelled the shadow.

The char moved quickly to the farther side of the log. There was a brief silence, broken only by the shuffling of feet. The baited line came down until

the sinker rested on the bottom, then was drawn up a little and the scrap of meat twirled slowly.

But the fish in the gloom on the further side of the log was too low to see the bait. The sinker swayed gently and seeing it she rose boldly and crossed the log to stop with her nose six inches from it. The line started to jig invitingly and though the lead seemed lifeless she snapped it only to expel it on the instant it was jerked upward. She retreated hurriedly.

But desire outweighed her wariness and she came toward it again. In this barren place any moving thing had a strong allure. As she came up she saw the meat turning slowly as it drew tight the line below the sinker.

All her caution vanished. She cut sharply toward it and her nostrils told her it was flesh. Remembering the sudden movement of the line, she swam away, starting a wide circle but quickly cutting inward toward the bait again. She came menacingly as if to startle it but it did not move. She swung about and took it savagely.

A vicious jerk turned her half over but it did not tear the meat from between her clamped jaws. She staggered, righted herself and started downward, challenging the power overhead, and as she made off,

the hook tore out of the meat and flipped harmlessly past her cheek. When she felt the resistance stop she spat the prize out, caught it and swallowed.

The line was pulled above the ice and Berkett huddled beside the hole bent over to grasp the empty hook. A supreme and surging hope had come to him, stimulating him, banishing the listlessness against which he had always to fight. For a brief moment anticipation had fed and strengthened him, cleared the haze from his mind, showed him deliverance complete and inevitable. But with the sag on the line it all had ebbed and left him weaker for that one glimpse of hope. This was just another stone on that pyramid of misfortune that had reared itself to crush him out.

As he stared at the bare hook, he tried to readjust his thoughts. He had failed this time but he still had his hook and one piece of priceless bait and he was certain there was a hungry fish down there. He had one more card to play; but only one, and if he lost—

The wind was rising and a vagrant gust snatched snow dust from the pile he had made, twisted it into a ghostly spiral and let it collapse on the bare ice. If he lost he would go down like that and be absorbed into the desolation which was claiming everything.

He took the other piece of bait from his pocket to

fix it to the hook. There must be no fumbling now, he told himself, and turned from the hole in case it should drop there.

He no longer had to make himself anticipate and puzzle over possibilities. All the scattered morsels of chance were lumped. If he caught this fish with this one piece of bait he might live, if not—

The stark simplicity of impending events unnerved him. He talked to the chilled fingers fumbling with his bait and hook, warned and cajoled them to perform their vital task. When it had been done he turned and lowered the line through the hole.

The taste of food had made the old char bold. She was cruising impatiently near the bottom and when she saw the bait sinking she rose and took it, turned and angled swiftly downward. There was slack line and she was over the log before the line came taut. A jerk tore hook and bait from her mouth and as they slid over the side of the sunken log the hook fastened itself into the tenacious wood. A pause—a stronger tug—the line parted.

Above were broken sounds of movement, then the crunch of snowshoes moved off, became fainter, were lost in silence. The old char came warily back to strip the harmless hook. In years gone by she had

brought disaster to many living things that came to Alder Creek. But soon there would be no more danger at the creek mouth, for the two scraps of meat could not sustain her long.

Down the lake a black spot moved, trudging unsteadily toward the blizzard which would swoop when darkness came.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CREED INVIOLATE

As Berkett cleared the end of the lake and started up the gentle slope which would break downward half-a-mile ahead and lead him to the river, it was not the greed for gold which drove him on. It was the fear of retribution at the hands of Ed Sibley.

What a fool he had been to discard the small load of grub. Most of all what a fool he had been to think he could shake off the pursuit of that Twin Forks youth and his dog. Between them they would get him, and Berkett had lived long enough in the wilds to realize that his betrayal of a partner would outlaw him utterly.

Whether Ed Sibley fought him, or whether he let him go to the settlements, he could not escape the penalty of his dishonesty. Men would look at him meaningly, stop, and turn contemptuously once young Sibley told the truth.

Why had he done it? At heart Berkett was not a criminal. Behind his love of talk, his proneness to boasting, he was not a bad sort, and now as he staggered up the long ridge he would have given anything

to have never committed this unforgivable crime of desertion.

"Sibley was a square shooter, an' I had to try and double-cross him," he thought bitterly. "Now either him or the wilderness will get me. What am I trying to get away from anyhow?"

But his guilty fear goaded him to expend the last of his ebbing strength to get away. Nor did he realize how close behind him his two pursuers were.

That morning when, far down the lake, he saw the moving solitary figure head in toward the creek mouth, Ed Sibley had turned out of the broken trail and, keeping behind the fringe of timber, had made good time along the lake shore. A mile away he had seen Berkett leave the place and now he was following hard upon his trail.

All morning the storm haze had thickened. Through it the sun became a clot of yellow light—a wan ruler outshone by his attendant sun-dogs on the rim of storm ring. Its light still cast blurred shadows, and behind the toiling man and dog the cowering shadows shortened. Then, after the shadows began to sidle eastward Ed and Mac saw the absconding Berkett trudging across a brûlée to the raw banks of the river. Contemptuous of stealth Ed paused on the skyline and looked down. A moment

later when the black dot below halted then turned straight for the river Ed knew they had been sighted.

"He's got the wind up already," Ed told the dog, but Mac, though his eyes followed the distant figure, gave no sign or exultant sound. "You got a short memory, mister," Ed told him. "At first you were ready to chaw him up—now you act as if you didn't give a hoot."

During the moment they paused there, Ed was able to read Berkett's rash plan. A mile upstream, through the sickly light of the baffled sun, Ed could see a safe crossing, but from there right to the entrance of the canyon close below them, an open lead of black water showed between the broken edges of shore ice. In this lead, flotillas of pan ice drifted, lodged and quickened as the canyon's fierce currents drew them to destruction. Already Berkett, scorning the safe detour above, was almost to the river only a quarter of a mile above where the towering rock walls of the canyon crunched and ground the floating ice.

"Crazy fool!" Ed yelled. "He's heading into trouble. Come on, Mac!" With the snow flying about his knees and Mac plunging in his wake, Ed angled down the last slope to get between the canyon and the place where the fugitive was starting to cross.

Among the down timber of the brûlée the river was

hidden from him but when he reached the bank, after a struggle through windfalls, he was aghast at what he saw. With open water all around him Berkett was trapped on an isolated cake. It was still fifty yards upstream from where Ed and Mac stood on the fringe of shore ice, but already the quickening current was hurrying it toward the canyon.

"Wait!" Ed roared when he saw the frantic captive make as if to jump. He knew that in such fast water the numbing cold would defeat any human swimmer, and even as he shouted he was tearing the long lashing line from his packboard, shaking out the hitches and fastening one end of it to Mac's collar in a slip knot.

"You're the only one kin save him," he panted hoarsely as he waved his arm for Mac to swim out and intercept the ice cake bearing down toward where they stood.

On the brink Mac hung back, then in response to Ed's commanding shout and Berkett's despairing yell he crouched, whined protestingly once then took the water in a surging plunge and angled out to meet the careening raft of ice.

As Ed watched the dog come alongside and scramble up with straightened forelegs and hind paws that clawed the ice for a precarious hold, a sudden fear gripped him. What if Mac, remembering the feud,

should refuse to let Berkett take the line from his collar? "Easy now, old boy," Ed called and as Berkett freed the rope and fastened it about his own waist, Ed felt a surge of relief to see that, after all, Mac was the kind of dog that easily forgot a wrong.

For Mac, ignoring Berkett, looked steadily at his master. Only fifty feet of black water separated them but Ed, bracing his feet against a hummock had no chance to read the dumb accusation in the fine eyes of his dog. He could not know that he had asked too great a price of this gigantic creature of the wilderness. For in all his savage life Mac had never compromised and he scorned to do so now.

"Grab the dog and jump—now!" Ed yelled as the cake swept abreast of him. He saw Berkett try to seize Mac's collar—and then in one terrific flash the revelation came. The dog that he thought could forget a feud sprang to the far edge of the ice cake in defiant fury against the touch of the man he hated. To serve a friend and fight an enemy, this was Mac's primitive creed and in the very face of death he would preserve that creed inviolate. When he brought the rope he had understood he must suffer that hand to touch him—but he was his own master now.

"Mac! Steady!" Ed's tormented shout was ignored for Mac, discipline forgotten, was watching

his chance to strike. Then as the dog defied him Berkett showed that under all his cheap bravado the flame of courage still burned. He floundered up the tilting cake and tried to clutch the dog—fangs slashed him as Mac shook himself free and then as the cake swept onward the line came taut and Berkett was pulled backwards into the fast water.

While he heaved Berkett to safety Ed's eyes were on his dog alone. Over and over the thought: "He hated Berkett but he went because I told him to," kept drumming in his anguished mind. Too late he saw Mac leap and try to make the shore. He saw the black underside of the ice cake come yawning up as it took the plunge into the canyon. A striving white head showed beside it and then, just before it was carried over, Ed heard Mac bark. In that bark was no wail of a thing which terror has gripped, but instead the clarion call of the untamed. Then the white spot disappeared.

A moment later Berkett stood beside Ed Sibley on the shore ice. He was all but sobbing now, his swagger gone forever under the sincerity of his feelings. "That Mac—he was made of better stuff than me," he groaned.

"Yes, Berkett," Ed agreed, his eyes still on the black gateway of the canyon. "Yes, he was made of better stuff than you—or me." He did not speak

accusingly but as one who repeats some high, eternal truth.

Back in the green timber across the river a low moan came from the slowly swaying boughs. It was the forerunner of the swooping blizzard, the storm on which, so the Norse saga says, Viking heroes ride gloriously to their Valhalla. And unless some miracle had happened the dog would be with them—to-night Mac might course far trails in the immortal company of his peers.

CHAPTER IX

TRAILS THAT MET

For three long days Ed Sibley had mushed his mail team up the valley which wound its way beyond the far frontiers of settlement. Sometimes going ahead to break trail for his toiling dogs, sometimes straining on the gee pole of the sled, always he faced the inexorable wind that funnelled down every draw between the towering hills walling in the river below the canyon.

This was his first trip into the up-river country since the days, weeks before, when the gold excitement on Wolverine Creek had petered out. He and the strangely altered Berkett had staked ground there, ground which was fairly close below discovery; and taking advantage of the offer of some wild-cat speculators, the Comet crowd of old timers had sold out their holdings at a small, but very acceptable profit.

To no man had Ed Sibley told of Berkett's treachery during those days and nights when the pair travelled over the hills from the Forks. Not even Hoskins or Olson suspected what had happened there. They knew that young Ed was still feeling

keenly the loss of his Mac dog, but so far as they could hear from the youth himself, he and Berkett were friendly. Berkett himself did not return to Twin Forks. Nor did he seem inclined to go back to the upper country after his work on Wolverine Creek was done. Instead he shunned all settlements, seemed determined to bury himself in the wilds, away from the company of men.

No amount of talk on Ed's part could convince the repentant man that his betrayal had been forgiven. "No use talkin'," he had insisted. "No man living could forgive me for what I tried to pull on you. You think you've wiped the slate clean."

"Forget it," Ed had protested.

"I can't—nor you can't either. You must hate the sight o' me. Everywhere I go, I keep thinkin' folks must know. I want to be alone. I'm what I deserve t' be—an outcast. Why, man alive! If you had a chance to pay off that score you'd have t' take it, in spite of yerself. Anybody would. I'm gonna den up in the bush somewheres till I can look a real man 'tween the eyes again."

So, after he had aided Ed in his vain search for Mac's body somewhere below the canyon, Berkett had vanished from the settlements on Quartz and Wolverine creeks. With his meagre savings he had bought

outright a backwoods homestead beside Beaver Falls, over the range to the northwest of Summit City. No one had seen him since.

His approach to the canyon revived in Ed's mind the tragic happenings of the month before. He toiled on. As mail carrier he was up to schedule, but as one hurrying in the hope of proving the truth of a splendid rumor he had heard, he feared he was late—too late perhaps. This was the gnawing fear which spurred him on.

It had been a hard trip even for one with much experience in those far northwestern mountains, but Ed Sibley would not spare himself for out of the wilds had come to him the rumor that Mac had been seen alive. A northbound Indian had tried to capture him and put him in his team. He had failed but Ed feared that some other Indian, returning to the tribe's distant trapping grounds, might lure Mac to his camp with food and, once out of the canyon country, Ed knew he would never see his big cross-breed again. He had tried to cut down time, yet his progress had been exasperatingly slow. For there was a rebel in his outfit and that rebel was Derry—the Airedale who sullenly refused to submit to the discipline of trace and collar.

"What's eatin' you anyhow?" Ed shouted as Derry

almost piled the sled on a tricky turn by trying to charge a jay which jeered him from the gaunt branches of a vine maple.

The terrier, who loathed this drudgery after a glorious autumn of hunting in the south country, merely lifted one ear in impudent indifference and gave Ed a slighting backward look. As Fizz, the plodding wheeler, jostled him Derry glared as if to ask the old dog who in thunder he thought he was pushing. But when Ike, the leader, swung and clipped his teeth in angry warning the black and tan insurgent faced him with ruff erect.

Like the dragging sled, the traces and the round, padded collar about his unwilling neck, the Airedale thought these two old huskies were in league to curb his restless spirit, to keep him from seeking game in every likely looking bit of trail-side cover.

"That's how you feel, is it?" Ed yelled. "Won't pull yourself an' want to tie into dogs that will."

Derry, serious but unrepentant, looked at his master through half shut, troubled eyes.

"You'll come outa that so quick it'll make yer head swim," Ed rasped, yanking the collar off the rebel, unsnapping the middle traces and hitching Ike and Fizz into a two-dog tandem. A pair of willing dogs was better than a disorganized team. He shoved the useless harness under the sled lashings, ordered Derry

out of the trail and pushing hard on the pole started to breast the steady slope ahead.

Derry pretended indifference as he watched them start. He rolled in the snow to take the feel of the collar from his shoulders, waved his paws in air absurdly, scooped snow onto his black button of a nose, tried to snap it off, then writhing, buried his head and lifted it suddenly to watch the team depart. But his two brown eyes behind the clownish mask of white belied his brave show of lightheartedness. Even when he sprang up and charged the derisive jays, his antics suggested bravado and there was a hollow heartiness in the bark he gave to let his master see he did not care. He barked again hoping to compel his master to look back.

But Ed did not turn. Although the first heat of his anger had died he still brooded on the precious hours Derry's continued insurrection had caused him. Suppose that when he reached the canyon to-night he should find Mac gone. His duty to the mail contractor would not permit pursuit northward on the trail of some Indian. Yet if Mac were gone—doomed to a life of slavery in the traces—Ed felt he could never forgive himself.

Like all men of action Ed Sibley was ashamed of sentiment, but like most of them he had his sentimental side. And since that terrific moment when

the big black and white dog had gone to seeming death because of his unswerving loyalty, Ed had held himself to blame. He should never have sent Mac into that maelstrom of grinding ice. If he could find him, somehow he would make it right with the dog. It was unfair, he knew, but if he came too late to the canyon he felt he should never think the same of Derry—the dog whose rebellious spirit had cost him precious hours. He looked back. Derry, sobered now, was trotting slowly in the trail.

Then at the thought of what he and that plucky terrier had been through together, his resentment dwindled. "Poor old duffer," he mused. "I'll make up to him to-night."

Already the sun was dropping from sight. High overhead the clouds of swirling snow, which had wavered like pennants along the lee edges of the peaks, settled and disappeared as the day wind died. He urged the dogs into a trot. Then as they rounded a rock hummock and its busby of snow which the wind had pushed tipsily awry, Ed saw a muffled figure and a solitary dog plodding toward him through the grove of silver birch ahead.

"By the old rory-eyed!" he began, "if it ain't—" The view halloo with which Fizz and Ike greeted the travellers was cut short by Ed's yell. "Get into those collars, gang," he roared at them and then rushing

past the sled he made for the big dog bounding toward him. It swerved to make sure the scent confirmed the evidence those first shouts had given and then leaped upon Ed with ecstatic, throaty growls.

"Mac, you wallopin' old giant!" Ed was shouting as the dog, beside himself with delight, reared up and struck Ed's chest with his mighty forepaws.

Mac pushed his muzzle into the folds of the mackinaw coat, he sniffed and snorted, jabbed his master's face with a wet, ice-cold nose, then ran around and around him in a panic of delight. He stopped and stood back, his forehead wrinkled, wonder in his fine eyes as if he sought a solution of this miracle. Then as if the why and wherefore did not matter, as if the glorious fact was supremely sufficient, he reared up on his haunches, a grin on his expressive, long-jowled face, and threw himself on Ed once more. He and Ed were in a tussle of hilarious delight when the man —Barney McGurk, a prospector from Quartz Creek —came up to them.

"There's yer ole meat hound," he jested as he greeted Ed with the abusive goodwill only close acquaintances dare use. "They's a bunch of Indian malamutes round the canyon. To-day when I stopped fer lunch they was aimin' to pile into him. He give me the once-over an' tagged along. Kinda looked at me like he was saying, 'Don't think much o'

you, fella, but I'll trail you till a real man comes along.' Didn't you, old bum?" McGurk added, turning to the prancing dog.

Mac's bushy tail waved happily. He pricked his black-edged ears and panting from the fine frenzy of his greeting, he looked from the prospector to Ed as if to say that Barney was a friend and that he hoped that Ed would honor the friendship.

"Never do to talk secrets with him listenin'," McGurk commented in admiration. "Seems like he knows every word you say—yes, by gory! an' some you only think."

At the realization that Mac was actually his again Ed groped for words to tell the prospector of his gratitude. But like most of his kind, Ed was inarticulate when deep feeling swayed him, so all he said was, "Thanks, Barney—that pack of Indian dogs might a' done for him." But he knew and McGurk knew that in Ed Sibley the prospector had a friend for life.

"'Tain't nothin'," McGurk grunted as he shrugged out of his shoulder straps and dropped his heavy pack with the air of a man who has at last downed a persistent adversary. "What say we make a joint camp of it?"

"You bet," Ed sang out as he jogged back to where Fizz and Ike stood irresolute under the good-natured

scrutiny of the huge stranger who had acted so absurdly when he met their driver.

"Giving 'em the once-over?" Ed asked as he thumped Mac's sturdy ribs. "But that's not all the outfit, old boy. There's a little packet of dynamite and deviltry coming along behind somewheres. He's a real partner for you, see?"

Mac's tail was waving again and his forepaws did a happy one-step on the trodden snow.

"You an' Derry'll get along fine," Ed went on as he unhitched the dogs who, after eyeing Mac suspiciously, sidled off to the balsam thicket in front of which McGurk was making camp.

In Ed's mind Derry's late unruliness dwindled to insignificance before the glorious fact that Mac and he were united again. Often he had anticipated the meeting of this great cross-breed and Derry, his staunch comrade on many a far trail, and at any moment now that meeting would take place.

"Come up here and I'll tell you about him," Ed suggested. He slapped his chest invitingly and smiled to see that Mac, rearing to place a forefoot on either shoulder, had not forgotten that old gesture. Ed hooked his fingers deep into the thick hair of Mac's throat and held the big head on a level with his own.

"This pup dog I'm telling you about," he was be-

ginning, when he felt Mac's neck stiffen and saw his gaze shift suddenly toward the snow-capped hummock of rock. Still holding the dog, Ed turned in time to see Derry come racing around the corner, to see the terrier's keen pleasure at sight of him and then to see that pleasure give place to hostility at sight of the big stranger reared against his master.

"Come along here, you old rascal," Ed shouted. But instead of responding to the cheery invitation Derry, now slowed to a deliberate walk, never took his eyes from Mac. Ears flat, head low and shoulders bristling, there was a quickly intensifying threat in every forward step. Then Ed Sibley saw, for the first time in their years of association, that the red flame of jealousy was smouldering in the brown eyes of his reckless Airedale.

He dropped Mac's forefeet to the snow and started back. "Forget it, son," he soothed. "That big guy's going to be a side-kick of ours. Come along and meet him. Come on now."

Derry's glaring eyes never wavered from the big dog waiting for him in the trail. But Ed knew by the pressure of Derry's shoulder against his knees that the misunderstanding of an hour ago had been forgiven. He stooped, threw an arm around the Airedale's chest and pulled the hard-muscled body closer to him.

Immediately Derry's enmity toward Mac seemed to lessen. Here was assurance that after all he was not to share his master's affection with another dog. Impulsively he turned his head and licked the back of Ed's unmittened hand, his tail stub wagged and Ed, reassured, sprang up and walked toward where Mac stood gravely watching.

But Derry reached the big dog first. Every line in his tense body, every rasping growl showed the intensity of his hate, and when Ed tried to drag him back he shook angrily free of the detaining hand. Such was the meeting of Derry and Mac, dogs who were strangers to each other but who at different times had showed their boundless loyalty for Ed Sibley. And as Ed, in the tragedy of that moment, watched them, he saw all hope of a partnership between them failing because of Derry's unsuspected jealousy.

"It's all right, Mac," he muttered in answer to the big dog's quick upward look of inquiry. "You an' me'll keep cool. Mebbe the old lad'll feel better in a minute."

Ed reached forward, patted Mac's head then tried to coax Derry within reach. When he looked up he saw that the time for reconciliation had passed, for Derry, sullen and resentful, was stalking down the trail to the rock hummock. Ed called pleadingly to

him but Derry ignored the call. It was a rebuff more stinging than any words could be.

"Better get him into camp," McGurk called from the balsam thicket. "Them half-starved malamutes from the canyon'll be huntin' with the moon to-night. He'd be just so much meat to them."

Ed, knowing the ruthlessness of such a hunger-maddened pack, lost no time in heeding the warning. He ordered Mac toward camp and ran down the trail but when he reached the rock hummock Derry had disappeared somewhere in the spreading dusk beneath the evergreens. He shouted and whistled with futile persistence until darkness fell. Then he returned to camp to wait until the full moon brought light enough for him to track the terrier whose flaming spirit had made him a fugitive in the brooding night.

Two hours later Derry, still avoiding the man who had unintentionally wounded his proud heart, sat on the edge of the big brûlée a mile from camp and watched the moon rise beyond the distant crest. The charred tree stubs stood like totems on the graves of the fire-killed forest, the light on the skyline grew stronger and then the edge of the moon slid into view. The broken branches of the ruined trees were silhouetted against it like the arms and fingers of skeleton

grotesques doomed forever to earthbound immobility, but the balloon of cold fire eluded their despairing clutches and floated clear. The light flowed down the slope like a silver tide which floods some crumbling dyke and then as Derry rose to cross the brûlée he was held moveless by the long-drawn cry which wavered down it from the skyline.

One forefoot lifted high, shoulder muscles tingling, he listened to that weird, ululating howl in which an invitation was mingled with a threat. Then filled with a savage loneliness he started up the slope, weaving his way around the snow ridges below which lay the trunks of fallen trees.

Every move of his lithe body told of a primitive wariness, but something wild—something which was kept suppressed while he sojourned in the camps of men—urged him to respond to that age-old hunting call and share with the strange pack the lust and fierce excitement of the chase. Once, as if he sensed the trap that waited for him, he stopped and looked across the tops of the evergreens toward camp. But with that big alien sharing the fire's glow with his master there could be no welcome for him there and so, turning, he went on and on toward where in the shadows vague forms waited. Then as he neared the top of the last bench he saw the leader of the pack

statuesque and watchful against the serene disk of the moon.

Derry halted guardedly in the angle made by a windfall and its sprawling, snow-draped roots. But already the leader had sighted him and even had he wanted to he could not have retreated. For from left and right of him grey thin-flanked forms were flitting across the fantastic lattice of tree shadows, edging closer, silent, intent, hungry for the flesh of this black and tan wanderer from the white men's camp.

And still the leader on the skyline waited. Once from somewhere at the bottom of the long brûlée Ed's anxious shout came up to them, once Mac's distant baying made a lurker in the shadows yap derisively. Then, secure in their isolation on the ridge, the malamutes, as if by some prearranged signal, began to close.

In all his adventurous life Derry had never retreated and, scion of a valiant clan, he scorned to do so now. Still standing in the angle at the base of the overturned tree he waited, a lone clansman whose back was to the wall. As the slayers closed in on him he heard again Ed Sibley's shout and the deep, running bark of the black and white dog his master had befriended. But they were as sound from another world. Somewhere down there they were floundering on his trail while up here beneath the vast spotlight

of the moon he would go down battling grimly. He saw the leader come bounding down the slope straight for him, he shot a glance to left and right and then with body slightly crouched and fangs bared in a silent snarl, he waited for the leader to close with him.

Behind the grey form of the leader crowded other dogs. Derry knew their kind, knew they would fight like jackals in a pack and as the leader rushed and swerved he refused to be drawn from his chosen battleground. From the left a dog lunged, Derry's head swept low and out, his teeth crunched the fine bones of the enemy's forepaw and then as the others surged at him he heard Mac's bark once more break the grim, expectant silence.

He was fighting for his life now. His hindquarters and one flank were pressed for cover against the mat of frozen roots. Confident and gloating, half-a-dozen foes were scrambling for him, hampering each other by their eagerness and as they reached for him he fought as he had learned to fight with the Indian dogs of a dozen frontier towns. To slash and tear but never hold, this was his strategy. He heard scrambling paws between the roots, one flashing look told him his flank would soon be exposed and then, as if determined to take at least one life for his own, he seized the leader full across the throat, he lost his footing and hung grimly on.

There were wounds already on his back and shoulders, at any instant one of the marauders would get a fatal hold. Then with a roar like an enraged giant a strange dog flashed into the bloody mêlée and like some berserk Norseman threw himself at the greedy horde. One malamute turned in time to face the avenger and was sent sprawling, squealing its terror as its life blood stained its creamy chest.

Even through the confusion of the fight Derry knew some ally had miraculously come and when he felt the leader totter he shook free and came up almost blinded—but unbeaten. Twice he crippled dogs that milled about him and then the wave of demons broke and Mac came plunging through the breach he had made.

Derry, panting and bewildered, sprang back to the scant shelter beside the roots. The pack was routed now but here before him was the greatest enemy of them all. He was about to spring when he saw Mac, ignoring him, bound after the circling pack and hurl himself upon the leader. And then the terrier, game but staggering, understood!

When Ed Sibley came gasping up the last few yards of slope he saw Derry standing with head low, breathing hoarsely. He saw Mac lick a slight wound on his shoulder and then, still unseen by either dog, he watched the terrier eye the other and then sidle

forward, touch noses with his gigantic, unasked-for ally and reaching up, gently lick the red stain on Mac's snowy shoulder. Slowly, with grave dignity, Mac turned until he stood close beside the Airedale. Then together they looked up the ridge over which the enemy had fled.

So they stood, the one stately and solid as a rock, the other dauntless and unbeaten, and it was Ed Sibley, his senses a-tingle with the fierce beauty of what he saw, who made them turn.

"White—you're white, the both of you," he kept repeating.

Then he ran forward, dropped to his knees on this trampled battleground where the feud lay buried and threw an arm around the neck of each of these staunch comrades who now could fare together far over splendid mountain trails.

CHAPTER X

THE AVENGER

Ed Sibley had thought that when he delivered the Quartz Creek gold shipment to Devon, the mail contractor at Summit City, he would also be relieved of the weighty sense of responsibility which had kept him nervously alert during the ten days and nights he mushed and camped along the mountain trail. But that evening as he sat in Devon's cabin with a receipt for the consignment securely buttoned inside his shirt pocket he found himself still vaguely worrying.

"Ding it all, Mac," he exclaimed, disgustedly tossing to the table the magazine with which he had been trying to divert himself, "they must be a hoodoo in those two yellow bricks. They've got me jinxed for sure."

Mac, still exultantly happy in the presence of his new-found master, flicked one ear in a polite show of interest, stretched his great legs luxuriously then rolled to warm his other flank in the glow of the wood heater near the door of the log-walled room. Already he was finding life more placid, but less exciting, without his black and tan partner. For Derry, handicapped by a slash received in that epic

brûlée fight—a wound that had refused to respond to what treatment Ed could give it on the trail—had been sent to Twin Forks by train that afternoon. There Sandy Hoskins was to care for him until he was again in fit condition for arduous mountain travel.

"Advisin' me to take it easy?" Ed grinned. "It's a good tip. You worked as hard as me to get the stuff here safe and now you say to forget about it. Trouble is, I'm not as sensible as you. Us humans get ourselves all geed up and then— Hello! Mac —you hear something?"

Even before Ed's ears caught the brittle crunch of feet on the packed snow outside the door, the big lead dog was on his feet. Had Derry been in Mac's place he would probably have barked a challenge and stalked to the door to boldly confront the man whose step he did not know. But during the grim months when Mac had roved the unchartered mountain valley which was his birthplace he had been both hunter and hunted. And there he learned the value of the element of surprise. So it happened that the next instant when, in answer to the brusque knock Ed shouted "Come!" the strange man who stood in the black oblong of the doorway did not see the giant dog beside him in the shadows near the wall.

After the semi-darkness the man seemed con-

fused by the white glare of the gasoline lamp on the table. "Guess I hit the wrong cabin," he began. "You aren't Devon."

"Never claimed to be," Ed smiled. "Step in anyhow. This is his place."

"Thanks, but I'm looking for Devon himself. Oliver's my name—fur buyer. They tell me he's got some pelts to sell."

Still the stranger, reluctant to enter, did not see the black and white watcher in the shadows. "I'll look in later," he was saying. And Ed knowing that because of the yellow treasure in his keeping, Devon had planned to sleep in his office at the store that night, was framing some non-committal reply when he heard a solid snap of teeth—a sound as startling as if a steel trap had been sprung somewhere in the cabin. He saw the man draw back his arm and grip the edge of the door as if to hurl it shut against the dog who now openly faced him.

"Lie down," Ed yelled angrily. "What you tryin' to celebrate? He isn't used to town," he apologized. "Sorry if he gave you a start."

"Nothing to speak of. Didn't notice him, that's all. Well anyway, you tell Devon I'm ready to talk business with him. So long for now."

"You're a bit too cocky, mister," Ed chided when the stranger had gone. "You're not in the hills

now. Better lay off that scrappy stuff. Folks don't like it—savvy?"

Mac yawned nonchalantly under the reproof. Then as he saw Ed pick up the magazine and cross his moccasined feet on the corner of the table, he lay down beside the stove, rested his heavy-jowled muzzle on his forepaws and curled his brush along his flank.

But he could not drowse again. The memory of the man who had disappeared into the night filled him with a persistent, growing restlessness. For the dog there had been some hidden craftiness in the eyes which from under the safe shadow of the hat brim had quickly scanned the roughly furnished room and had dwelt for a significant instant on the two rifles in their places on pegs above the table. Without conscious purpose Mac rose and prowled about the cabin, his blunt claws tick-tacking on the worn linoleum. Ed ignored him until, after prodding his master's knee with his muzzle, Mac stalked to the door and scratched it asking to be let out. Then Ed, absorbed at last in his story, left his seat and complied with the mute request. Quietly Mac slipped out. Under the spell of his adventure yarn his master gave little thought to the dog who from the moment the door closed behind him began to be drawn into the plot of a drama more sinister and compelling than the one he read in the warm cabin—a drama

which within half-an-hour was to rouse him to its ghastly reality with a shout out of the night—a shout of: "Get here quick! Your dog has tried to kill a man!"

On the snow-packed planks outside the cabin door Mac stood and faced up wind, sniffing with muzzle high and ears laid flat against the chilling sweep of air. Above the blurred line of mountain tops Orion —that swashbuckling constellation—strode in the avenue of sky between the broken curbs of peaks. A myriad stars danced there, lost step and fell into step again. Night clogged the streets of the raw town.

Slowly, as if the squat buildings had been part of some difficult hunting ground, Mac began to work up wind. Down the deserted road whose frozen ruts had been swept bare of snow, he started toward the darkened railway station. Where the tracks ran east and west the night had thinned a little before the baleful eye of the switch lamp, but everywhere else ahead of him, across the flat, up the sidehills to the sky, it had triumphed.

The big leader did not trot carelessly as an idle dog would. He stopped frequently to sniff the hurrying air currents, to listen and with head low to peer through the gloom. To-night in this little frontier town Mac was hunting with all the cold method

he had learned to use in the days when, before he gave his allegiance to Ed Sibley, he had coursed the game trails of the mountains. The intuition which had warned him at the cabin door now drew him on to find and stalk the strange man.

The north wind thrummed the taut telegraph wires above him, sometimes boldly plucking them to discords, sometimes muting them to plaintive minors. And then as he neared the solid bulk of the water tower he stopped with one forefoot held high and head outthrust. For from the hewn props and braces of the tower the fingers of the wind drew out shreds of the scent he sought. From the eastward an angry wail rolled down the valley as the midnight freight whistled on Dome Mountain curve, but the dog seemed not to hear it as he edged closer to the black core of the tower's shadow.

A moment later his stealthy approach brought him to the origin of the scent—a suitcase hidden behind the woodwork of the tower. Fresh tracks led away from it and Mac, intent and watchful as before, started along them, followed them until they disappeared on the wind-swept road. Back to the cabin they led him. Then they turned into the alley between the hotel and the store of the Devon Trading Company. At the end of that alley he stopped, his ruff rising, his body tense as a coiled spring. For

by the warm outrush of air he knew that the small window above him was open. Then as he waited he heard the mumble of an unknown human voice inside.

Though no scent of the speaker reached him, though his only evidence was that oddly grating voice from the blackness inside the open window, Mac knew evil was afoot. Already Devon was a friend of his, and now, through a window he had never seen open, there came a voice which was not the voice of Devon.

The whistle of the westbound freight was blaring out again, its headlight was boring a tapered tunnel through the dark between the singing rails. Slowly, warily, a leg was lowered over the sill. Like some gigantic avenging cat Mac leaped, his teeth clipped together as he missed his mark, the leg was withdrawn and then, while the freight came to a grinding stop at the water tower, he heard that grating voice again, followed by a metallic click.

"Stow that gat. You want to wake the town?" With swelling rage Mac recognized this second voice as belonging to the stranger who had faced him at the cabin door. Even as a growl bubbled from his throat he saw the outline of Oliver's head and shoulders. "We got to lay that hound cold," he warned his accomplice. "I'll handle him. If we get separated, get in touch with me soon's you can. Come on now."

Mac heard the thud of running feet inside. After one vain leap he knew he could not pass the barrier of the window, so seeing the back door shut, he rushed around the building in time to see the big door there swing open and two men step hastily into the V-shaped entrance between the show windows.

"Run for it!" Oliver ordered as the jangle of the locomotive bell told them the train was ready to start. Then as Mac confronted them in the entrance both men rushed and a startled, short-clipped yelp of pain came from him as Oliver, in the lead, dealt him a smashing blow with the pick handle he had taken from the rack inside the door.

"Lay him out," the grating voice urged. Then Mac and his assailant were alone. But even as the red haze of battle rose before his eyes, clouding his senses and numbing him to all except a deadly intentness on his principal foe, the odd quality of that voice registered itself deep in his consciousness.

Oliver advanced boldly, exultant now in seeing the big dog back away from him. But it was strategy, not fear, that made Mac yield, for he knew that in the narrow entrance he could make only a frontal attack. As a young dog in an Indian village he had more than once defied a man with a club; he circled and Oliver, running now, was brandishing his club

when opposite the hotel door Mac charged again. And this time, true as a wolf leaping to the kill, his fangs gained the hold they wanted.

Staggering, whirling in a frenzy of fear, Oliver fought to free himself. But in the strength of that plunging body, in the relentless grip of those jaws, he read the horrible truth. He was trapped and at the mercy of this dog who meant to kill him. He lurched, sent the pick handle spinning out into the deep snow along the road, then screamed for help. Even as the hotel door flew open Mac brought him thudding down. Two men rushed out and struggled desperately to break the big dog's hold. "Hey, Sibley!" one of them shouted toward Devon's cabin. "Get here quick. Your dog's tryin' to kill a man!"

Not until Ed, filled with ghastly apprehension, seized him, did the enraged Mac seem to realize what he was doing. And even after Ed had him clear of the prone man he tried to renew the attack the instant he saw his enemy regain his feet. Although Oliver was almost breathless from the constricting clutch upon his throat his muffler and the overcoat buttoned close under his chin had prevented Mac's fangs from finding bare flesh.

"Just stepped out to see if Devon was home yet," Oliver gasped. "You fellows saved my life. That dog's a man-killer."

A man-killer? In consternation Ed remembered the words of the old Indian from whom he had bought Mac as a young dog. "Some day his chance come—then he kill," the native had predicted. As Ed, still tussling with the angry dog, followed Oliver and his rescuers toward the hotel he thought fearfully that to-night the prediction had come perilously near fulfilment.

"You only got to report it to the police," one of the men assured Oliver. "Critters like him ain't safe to have around."

"You bet I'll have him shot," Oliver promised.

Not until Ed heard the threat did he fully grasp the grim significance of Mac's actions. With two witnesses to prove his accusation Oliver would have no trouble in convincing the police that Mac was a menace. Why, unless he himself lied, he would have to give evidence against his staunch comrade of the trails, would have to confirm Oliver's statement that he had seen Mac snap at him at the cabin door. Almost sick with dread he was telling himself that he and Mac must turn fugitives, must be safely into the hills before the dawn, when above the diminishing rumble of the freight train three revolver shots rang out in quick succession. Even as Devon's shout reached him, Ed was racing toward the store and when he heard the trader's account of how he had

been stunned, gagged and bound while the gold shipment was stolen, a fierce exultation seized him. From that instant he was positive Oliver was the thief and that Mac like a ghostly avenger had discovered him and dragged him down.

During the next hour things happened quickly in that night-wrapped mountain settlement. A Mountie came on a speeder from detachment headquarters at Twenty Mile. Then after he examined Oliver and announced him to be a *bona fide* buyer, after Devon had stated that Oliver was not the man of whom he had had a fleeting glimpse before he was knocked out, the conviction grew that in spite of suspicious circumstances, Oliver was not the robber. And Oliver, who was a persuasive and convincing talker, missed no chance to increase the growing belief among these straight-minded mountain folk.

No less than his master, Mac sensed the increasing hostility. In the big room of the hotel as he stood in leash beside Ed, he listened to the talk and understood something of the meaning in those unfriendly eyes about him. Erect and watchful, his glance never wavered from Oliver, for though he did not understand the man's words he knew there was deceit and cunning in his pose. With no suggestion of contriteness about him, the big dog of the wilds stood

there, always with his eyes on the enemy—the man whose very presence there was a maddening lie. Once when Oliver spoke loudly a threatening growl rumbled in his throat.

Ed, with the weight of opinion against him, regretted that sound of unwavering hostility. For he knew that Mac, the only true witness of the night's happenings, was playing into the hands of his enemy.

"See here, young fellow," Oliver blurted angrily, "you know that dog's waiting his chance to kill me —you saw him try to get me at the cabin. I'll give you your choice. Either you get him out of town quick or I'll have him shot. Take your choice."

The man's cold insolence blinded Ed to all consequences. "I'll believe my dog before I believe you, Oliver," he rapped out. "He says you're a crook. Well—that's good enough. Get me?"

At this, his master's first open show of hostility, Mac would have leaped forward to renew the battle had not the hotel keeper interrupted the murmur of disapproval by stepping toward the door and beckoning for Ed to follow him. "Let's talk outside, Sibley," he urged.

"Look, Ed," he said, not unkindly, when they and Mac were outside, "Oliver's got you and Mac right where he wants you. I've nothing against Mac but—take an old man's tip and clear out."

"And leave him here to brag? Not much," Ed retorted hotly.

"If you stay he'll have the dog done in. Nobody knows what really did happen here to-night and chances are nobody ever will. But Oliver can talk and Mac can't. Anyhow a dog's evidence won't go far in a court of law. I know how you feel, son, but take my advice and go."

Incoherent with protest and with the futility of his cause Ed hesitated, then with a mute farewell to his grizzled adviser he called his dog and disappeared into the night.

At Devon's cabin while he made up his pack and brought his snowshoes from the shed, the raw injustice of it all was almost more than he could bear. He looked at the clean-limbed giant who sat gravely watching him and in those fine, direct eyes he read no trace of guilt. "Nobody but me thinks you're a square-shooter, but I believe in you, old boy. . . . I believe in you." Then before turning out the lamp he threw his arms around the dog, holding him with a fierce affection. Abruptly he got up, shouldered his worn pack and started on the long trail, the tortuous trail, of the fugitive.

But before he and Mac crossed the railway tracks they were hailed by a tall, slim figure standing in the shadows beside the deserted railway station. The

watcher was Tomlinson, the Mountie from Twenty Mile.

He came forward casually as if the wind-swept road were the most natural of meeting places. "Don't do it, Sibley," he said.

From his manner the words might have been merely a polite suggestion but Ed, who knew the type of man Tomlinson was, understood them for what they were—an order.

"A trifle draughty out here," Tomlinson went on. "Let's you and me and the dog wander back to Devon's cabin and have a little talky-talk."

When it had ended that talk seemed to Ed the most absurd and disconnected affair imaginable. Tomlinson scarcely spoke of the robbery at all. He sat there and simply chatted about fly fishing, about the amusing antics of a mountain goat kid he had once watched, about the years he himself had spent as a dog driver in the Land of Little Sticks. He seemed to know a great deal about dogs and all the while he talked, all the while his smooth voice rose and fell he hardly looked at Ed. He seemed to be watching Mac, studying him as he sat there in the shadows near the heater.

"Devon's somewhat of a shrewd chap," he remarked during the few minutes he was speaking of the robbery. "Odd that he can't tell us more about

the affair. He did hear, or thinks he heard, something that may help later on. And by the way, you mustn't think too harshly of Oliver. He seems quite a decent chap—been buying a lot of fur up and down the line lately. Has quite a lot of customers—the station agent tells me he frequently has long distance calls for him. Good sort, the agent. I've invited you and Mac and myself to spend the fag-end of the evening there."

And so Tomlinson rambled on and as he talked he kept watching the dog whose ears lifted and fell at every change in his well-modulated voice. "Now I must go and have a bite of supper," he concluded. "In an hour or so then—and bring the big fellow with you. I must keep my eye on him. Under the circumstances it's only wise." Ed and Mac spent an impatient two hours.

On the advice of Tomlinson they did not leave the cabin, but from Devon they learned that the gold had not been recovered nor had any clue about the robber been found. Oliver, who insisted that Mac be shot, had been told by the Mountie that "something would most certainly be done about it."

After his late supper Tomlinson dropped in and himself put a leash on Mac before they went to the station. Mac, now virtually a prisoner, walked stolidly at the heels of the two men and when they

entered the railway office, lay down under the agent's desk at Tomlinson's soft command.

"Anything come through yet?" the officer asked and when the agent shook his head he remarked that the night was young yet. The three men were settling themselves to a game of dummy bridge when the phone buzzer on the desk sounded the Summit City call. Someone had a message for Mr. Oliver, someone speaking from the Commercial House at Division, thirty miles to the west.

As the agent reached for a pad to write the message Tomlinson's manner changed. The speaker's voice was amplified by the receiver so that it could be heard anywhere in the room and as it droned on, the Mountie tiptoed to where he could watch Mac beneath the desk. Mac felt the keen eyes upon him and looked questioningly up but in a moment he forgot the man observing him so strangely. For out of that nickel-plated instrument came a sound which roused memories within him, a human voice whose oddly grating qualities tantalized him. Yet, probably because of the strange medium by which it came, he showed no signs of recognition. He was interested. For some reason he himself did not quite understand he got up and faced the desk—but still he gave no hint that he had ever heard the voice before or that he recognized the speaker.

Tomlinson reached across the desk and wrote on the blotter:

"*Keep him talking.*"

Then, while the agent slowly asked the sender to repeat, the officer took the receiver from the agent's hand and held it toward the dog, at the full length of the cord.

"Please . . . quote . . . your . . . best . . . price . . . marten . . ." The rasping voice droned on as Mac, his cheek teeth gleaming between his lifted lips, leaned threateningly forward. Every slow word helped to dispel his former disturbing doubt. Whether he even now knew when he had heard that voice before was by no means certain, but from his subconscious self came a warning that in some obscure way there was hostility behind it. His senses, sharpened by the harsh necessity of his wild life, told him that here was a sign of some danger he had faced before. And for Tomlinson, who knew dogs as only men who have worked with them know them, it was evidence to strengthen his former slender clues.

No sooner had the receiver clicked into the hook than he rapped out an order. "Get me the hotel room number," he said and when he had it he asked to be put through to the Inspector at Division.

The next moment he was talking. "Tomlinson,

sir. It's room Forty-four—Commercial. Yes, sir, I think it's sound evidence. A witness identifies the voice. Yes, sir . . . Very good, sir, I'll stand by."

Twenty minutes later the Inspector was on the phone again. "Go ahead at your end," he instructed. "We got the stuff—and all the evidence needed to convict."

"It was a long shot—but it worked," Tomlinson said as with Ed and Mac he started for the hotel. "Devon was pretty foggy about what took place—naturally. But as he was coming to he thought he heard someone say something about "keeping in touch with" someone else. He thought he might have dreamed it. But thanks to Mac, it's going to prove a bad dream for somebody."

Oliver was coolly playing cards in the hotel when the front door opened and Mac stalked in—alone. Scraping back his chair he tried to get behind the table. But Mac came no nearer than the centre of the room. Cold, invincible, accusing, he watched every move of his enemy—the man he alone had known from the first was guilty. Then Tomlinson and Ed came in.

"You don't trust him, Oliver?" Tomlinson asked cheerily.

"Trust him? Say—"

"Can't say I blame you. Under the circumstances

you'll like him less. Oliver, you're under arrest for robbery with violence. You're nailed on the evidence of a dog. Your partner's caught—but that was the dog's work too." And Mac, grave, stern as the Northland law itself, stood watching as the handcuffs were snapped on.

CHAPTER XI

THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

ALIKE to great cities and to the raw settlements on the far Northwest frontier comes that brief hour between darkness and the day's full light when the dogs come out and quietly usurp the rule of their sleeping masters. During their undisputed occupation of deserted streets the dogs move with an assurance they do not feel during the crowded hours of day. They feel no yoke of discipline upon them then, there is some intangible difference in their manner as they stalk out from sleeping places and sniff the night-cleaned air for reports of recent news. Unhampered by Man's rule, unhampered even by the affection of their owners, they roam at will and renew acquaintanceship with others of their race. And that February morning as the last shreds of night melted from the vacant lots and tree-lined yards of the Twin Forks street every dog in the neighborhood soon knew that Mac, Ed Sibley's husky-and-Newfoundland cross had come to town to visit the now fully recovered Derry.

Pete, Colonel Dempster's over-stuffed English bulldog, was the first to receive the welcome news. With

rolling gait he came through his favorite opening in the Dempster hedge and stood there wheezing like an asthmatic sea captain. With one hard eye he scanned the weather, then when his gaze shifted to the Sibley house across the street he saw something that set his twisted remnant of tail vibrating with anticipation. He gurgled moistly and waddled into the frozen road as fast as his bowed legs would take him, then stood there waiting while these two friends overcame the barrier of the Sibleys' picket fence.

Mac, lithe as any wolf, loped toward it, gathered his feet beneath him and leaped for the top scantling, poised there for an instant then jumped to the sidewalk. Derry, with that vast self-confidence which frequently led him into absurd predicaments, also tried to clear it at a bound. From the vehemence of his rush and the energy he put into his jump it was evident that at the moment he was sure he was the very king of steeplechasers, but the scrambling crash with which his body met the pickets jolted that vain fancy from his head.

"Yah!" he grunted as the rebound threw him flat on his back in a soiled snowdrift. The fall did not discourage him. He glared sharply through the pickets at the two dogs watching him to make them understand that if they thought he really meant to clear the fence they were sadly mistaken. He'd only

crashed into the fence that way to see if there was a nail out anywhere. He swaggered to the gate, writhed under it at the cost of several tufts of brown and tan hair, then romped to where Peter and Mac were greeting each other. His absurd rocking-horse gallop and erect tail let them see he was not the dog to worry over the loss of a few hairs. Though farther up the valley winter still reigned, there were signs of spring here in the bottom land and soon he wouldn't need all his full coat anyway.

Mac had just conveyed to the bulldog the information that Ed and himself had arrived in town late the previous evening. He knew they would be leaving soon for his master had left most of his outfit at Summit City. But in any case he was elated at the sight of his old neighbor. Derry's morning greeting was not so formal.

"Hello, Cap'n Kettle," he yapped at Pete. "How's that crusty old man of yours been treatin' you?" The bull's nose wrinkled in a grin and Derry glanced back at the fence as if asking if Pete had seen the wallop he had handed it the moment before. Pete snuffled and then with the restless Mac in the lead the three dogs moved off down the middle of the road. In days gone by they had enjoyed each other's company immensely. Derry had had some hilarious mornings with Pete and several other dogs they both

knew, and now they were thrilled that those good times would soon come to them again. Somehow Derry felt like a frisky puppy at the prospect of finding Pete and all the others as keen for fun as they had been in previous springs.

At the corner they spied Horace, the aristocratic Spitz of the Simpson family. Horace was trying to get a drink from an ice-rimmed puddle. Horace was fat and ineffectual and when he saw the three dogs on the sidewalk grinning provocatively at him he decided he didn't really want a drink and trotted stiffly across the yard to join them.

Horace had certainly put on weight during the fall and winter while Mac and Derry had been roaming the hills. Mac stood grinning down at him. In the fall Horace had amused him and now he seemed more ridiculous than ever. Mac glanced at his sturdy Airdale partner and Derry, sensing the joke, prodded Horace in the neck with a stiff foreleg.

Horace eyed the terrier reprovingly. "You realize who you're pushing?" his glance said. By drawing himself up in what he fancied was a most warlike pose he gave them to understand that in his younger days he was a fighter it didn't pay to get familiar with.

"Reg'lar man-eater, I bet," Mac jested, laying his great head low between his spread paws. "Goin' to join the gang again?" his waving tail inquired. And

Horace, who in spite of pampering was still all dog, signified that he would.

"Good egg," Derry yipped and jostled the Spitz good-humoredly. They fell in close behind Mac and renewed their march.

Midway down the block, their friend Rags, a collie, joined them. As the procession went on the three stay-at-home dogs were no more than mildly expectant, but Mac and Derry, whose lives had always brimmed with the zest of life, tingled with a sharp, delightful anticipation. Surely with the old crowd at their heels they would find good sport before the sun rose and humans came from sleep to limit the field of a dog's activities. For this precious hour the world was theirs and need not be shared with any man.

Mac, as president of the Balsam Street Dogs' Social and Sporting Club, stopped at the next corner and looked questioningly at Derry. As chairman of the program committee, the Airedale should suggest what the first move was to be. But the conference of the president and his henchman was interrupted by the peevish abuse of a Chow from the sun porch window of the house across the street.

Mac frowned on the interrupter and the lap dog, made bold by the knowledge that the sun porch door was shut, became more abusive. "The scented pen

wiper," Mac growled to the others. "If he doesn't lay off that I'll ask one of you lads to go up there and inhale him."

"Ruddy half-portion," Pete wheezed. Derry was all for a massed assault upon the citadel of the snob but Mac's better judgment prevailed and with one contemptuous look at the shrieking Chow he took his gang up the side street. There he slowed down and by cocking his ears meaningly at Derry gave him to understand they should start the fun without further delay.

Derry tilted his head waggishly. The imps of fun were in his eyes and by wrinkling his brow he gave the impression that he was developing some irresistible diversion for his friends. The secret fact was that for the moment he was stumped. He raced around his big partner, stopped suddenly and glared intently at nothing in particular. Even the phlegmatic Pete began to suspect the terrier was bluffing.

A chattering flock of sparrows that alighted unexpectedly in the road seemed to solve the difficulty. Had they been as many grizzlies Derry could not have been more interested than he pretended to be. He leaped straight into the air and almost before his feet struck the ground he was running at them. "They're bloodthirsty blighters, I tell you," he

whooped as he led what he hoped would be a concentrated charge.

To Mac, sparrows seemed small game indeed but he loyally backed up Derry. Sparrows would do in a pinch; pursued in the proper spirit a dog could imagine them to be the size of smallish eagles. But to the blasé town dogs sparrows were only sparrows and only scatter-brained pups would think of chasing them. Mac and Derry sensed immediately that their ruse had failed. They fell to tussling in an effort to conceal the suspicion that they had made themselves seem ridiculous.

"Laugh that off," Derry whooped as he barged full tilt against his huge friend only to receive a thrust from Mac's shoulder which all but knocked him off his feet. He wanted to appear exuberant but there was a forced note to his hilarity. Like Mac he was feeling a growing perplexity at the other dogs' lack of response. What had happened to them? They had not been so critical, they had never seemed to care how trifling was the object of any game so long as it was played with gusto. What in thunder did they expect him to produce on such short notice—dinosaurs or something?

"Try something else," Mac's encouraging bark advised as they cantered back to where the three

others were stolidly waiting. "We'll not let 'em high hat us—we'll snap 'em out of that." He lifted his muzzle and tested the chill air currents which came to them from the row of gaunt trees.

Every dog in the pack watched him and presently they too began to sniff, not eagerly as he and Derry did, but in a diffident manner which showed they plainly doubted if there could possibly be any interesting game among the familiar trees. Mac stretched his neck, edged slightly to the left and gave each dog a glance of bright inquiry. "Cat! You boys sniff it?" he wanted to know.

They all lifted their muzzles and tested the air again, but there was skepticism, not anticipation, in the common gesture. Once, months and months ago, everyone of them had been a connoisseur of smells but now a winter of living within doors had dulled their sense of smell. Of the trio, old Pete alone really tried to get the scent. He stretched his thick neck and snuffled so gustily that Mac looked to demand what in blazes he was gargling for. Of them all, the two woods dogs alone correctly read the message of the air.

Ed Sibley's two dogs forgot their disappointment over the sparrow hunt as they dashed toward the nearest tree, with the others trailing at their heels. Derry and Mac leaped hopefully. They had the

gang on the move now and at any moment the fun would start. But when the cat was located half way up a leafless maple the brief interest of Rags and Horace and Pete waned. "Who," their superior looks demanded, "who could see any sport in a treed cat?"

"Come on, gang, let's razz it anyway," Derry barked and Mac sprang straight up with such energy that the cat's back rose in anger. Both he and Derry tried to make the others see that it was not what you hunted but the fun you got in hunting that gave zest to these early morning prowls. But Rags yawned and Horace, openly bored, was strolling off.

Mac and Derry gave it up. They looked at each other. Things had indeed come to a sorry pass when a real live cat, even if it was safely up a tree, could not get action from the old bunch. Who said they could actually catch it? Of course they couldn't, but they could have a wild time trying, couldn't they?

Their enthusiasm was all in vain. All too plainly they saw that. They looked at each other. Soft living had certainly played havoc with the morale of the crowd. They used to be regular fellows—even Horace had had his spirited moments. But look at them now—so spoiled by luxury that it would take a three-ring circus to get a laugh out of them.

Mac and Derry were optimists. Had they not

been they would have abandoned hope and gone off somewhere by themselves. "Snap out of it—you pillars o' gloom," Derry yipped at Pete. "You're dead from the paws up—the three of you."

Pete seemed on the verge of making some cutting retort but even the thought of that effort wearied him and he sat down to think idly of breakfast. Mac looked up at the cat. No, it couldn't be blamed for the fiasco. Its back was up, it was spitting and its tail had swollen to the size of a bottle brush. The gang had gone stale, he could see that now and in their failure to respond to this diversion he had found for them he read a subtle challenge.

Farther down the street he caught sight of the boy who delivered the morning papers which came into Twin Forks on the eastbound Local. He watched the boy hop off his bicycle and send a folded paper sailing to the front door of one of his subscribers. Through the early morning hush they could hear the solid "plop" as the paper struck the porch floor.

"Mebbe we can start something there," Mac thought as he and Derry jogged in the wake of the paper carrier. They looked back and saw that Pete and Rags were listlessly following but that Horace with his tail curved scornfully over his back was about to start homeward.

"Tryin' to crab things for us again," Mac snorted. 'Duck back and tell him to stick around."

Derry scurried back. Arching his neck, lifting his forelegs absurdly high, and with an ear folded inside out, he clowned about the diffident Horace. Soon the Spitz's loop of tail began to waver with amusement. Derry dodged and challenged him to race and as Horace set decorously in pursuit Derry allowed him to lead only to sweep past him at the finish.

When they were at their destination Derry kept the others at the gate while Mac entered the front yard. He was much too knowing to go directly for the paper. He sauntered over the drab lawn plot, pretended to inspect the gaunt lilac bush, edged nearer the house, sniffed a grass tuft, and after a careful examination of the windows bounded up the steps and snatched the newspaper then sped back to the street. He tossed his head and sent the prize spinning among the other dogs, barged into them, picked it up and whirled in invitation for them to try and get it.

"At him, gang. Come on—play ball," Derry panted. By every wile they knew the two Sibley dogs tried to get the town dogs to join in. They dodged among them, dropped the paper and pretended not to see it. But no. To Horace, Pete and

Rags a newspaper was only a newspaper. Heavens! Hadn't they lots of old papers at home?

Derry's exasperation made him forget himself. "You flat-footed, stall fed lap dogs!" he bellowed. "Sooner go promenadin' with pink ribbons round your necks like that monkey-faced Chow, would you? Wake up, blast you—wake up!"

This last was voiced with such vehemence that Mac, glancing at the house fronts, knew he must get them off that street at once. The hot-headed terrier would wake the neighbourhood. He led off at a business-like trot. Derry and the stolid Pete came immediately, Rags and Horace looked at each other, then seeing that Mac was headed around the block toward home anyway, they deigned to follow.

As they came again into Balsam Street Mac and Derry realized that if the next attempt failed their morning was ruined. For Mac, who had never been properly schooled in town ways, no quarry would be too formidable now. The milkman—the milkman's team—anything to save the day. He was desperate.

He stopped so suddenly that Pete, waddling at his heels, collided with him. He thrust his muzzle into the dead grass beside the board walk and sniffed, first critically then with conviction. "If you think I'm kidding you now, push your homely mug in

there," he suggested as he withdrew his head and eyed the bulldog.

One noisy inhalation and Pete's indifference vanished. When his nose came out of the grass it was twitching with excitement. Derry rammed his head into the hole and being in such a hurry to confirm the report, signalled with his tail before he withdrew it. "Shove your bills in there, boys," he advised as Horace and Rags came up, and when they got the scent their cool indifference fled. For from the dank ground under the planks there came out to them the one irresistible lure—the scent of rat!

"Hot diggedy dog!" Rags yodelled. "Let's make the dirt fly." And Horace, his aristocratic voice breaking with excitement, shrilled for them to stand back and let him at that hole.

They did. They let him at the hole and he attacked it so madly that Rags, in seeking an opening, was almost blinded by flying lumps of frozen turf. Mac and Derry scouted to right and left and Pete, dazed by his good luck, stood on the walk and pressed his nose into a crack, quivering and drooling with anticipation.

"I've spotted him," he announced as a grey shape flitted past the crack. Derry charged back to verify the report, but not being able to see the rat and

knowing Pete for an honest fellow, he barked his confirmation just the same.

That rat understood strategy. He had a safe retreat in a drain that passed under the walk and while the dogs milled about above, he scurried along his tunnel under the walk and gained the safety of his dugout.

It was not long before Mac discovered that the rat had outwitted them. And when these other dogs knew that they would abandon the sport. There was only one thing to do. Already Horace was losing zest and Rags instead of digging merely sniffed through the frost-stiffened grass. Somehow, some way, the dogs must be made to think there was a rat close by, and failing a real rat, a fictitious rat must do.

"Keep 'em at it," he barked to Derry and then as Horace left off burrowing in disgust Mac played his trump card. He whirled about, pounced, seemed to miss by inches and dashed into Colonel Dempster's yard after a rat which did not exist.

He played his part so superbly that even Derry was deceived. "Mac's onto him, boys. Come on!" he yelled and charged with the three others at his heels. Mac was already ploughing into the Colonel's straw covered bed of snowdrops. "Hide in here, would you?" he snorted. The four others came up in time

to receive a barrage of earth lumps from his plunging paws. Crowding and jostling they all began to dig furiously.

Like a flash Mac backed out of the mob. That shifty rat had dodged them a second time. Now it was in the next yard digging itself into the Simpson's woodpile. Tunnel, would it? They'd show it how to tunnel. No sooner had the others caught him up than the rat, which must have been swift as a fox, went to earth in the ash heap at the back of the yard where Rags lived.

Mac never gave them time to think. Back up the street he led the panting quartet, pretended to have over-run the trail, circled and then with a sharp bark brought them to the drain. Anxiously they all sniffed the opening then looked blankly at one another. "What rotten luck!" Mac seemed to say. "After having him in the open to let him get away like this."

But the others did not seem to mind. After all, even the best rat hunts must end. They had enjoyed themselves. And Pete, who was wheezing loudly, was too winded to go much farther. So by common consent they strolled back to the ash heap. Someone had been cleaning stovepipes there and among the little piles of fluffy soot they rolled luxuriously—to arise uniformly garbed in black!

It was there that Ed Sibley, attracted by the barking, spied them. At a glance he saw the worst.

"Mighty lucky I decided to pull out this morning," he told his dogs. "Seems like every time you two pirates come to town I got to get you out of some scrape. Thank goodness the train for Summit City —an' work—is due in an hour."

And so, just as the sun's first rays came slanting down Balsam Street, the three town dogs stood at the corner and watched their friends depart. For these there would be baths, carbolic soap and other forms of trouble to be faced that forenoon, but it was worth while, for thanks to Mac and Derry they felt like dogs again.

CHAPTER XII

THE WARRING STRANGER

After a hurried breakfast, Ed experienced the usual tussle in getting collars securely buckled about the necks of his two dogs. Like most dogs in that country they seldom had to wear these bothersome things. Dog tags were unknown, and Ed, like many other outdoor men, seldom let them run with collars for fear they would get "hung up" in the brush. He himself had known more than one dog which had had its collar fouled by protruding sticks while dashing through thickets and which had been strangled in its struggles to free itself.

But railway regulations made no exceptions of even such well known dogs as Mac and Derry. On the "local" a dog-loving conductor often allowed Ed to take one of them in the day coach with him. But this morning Ed was riding the aristocratic Limited back to Summit City and on it dogs must be leashed before being checked into the baggage car.

"You boys don't cotton to collars any more'n I do," he chuckled when he finally succeeded in adjusting the strap about each of their necks. "I know

just how you feel—but you got to get into 'store clothes' once in a while. Awright. Let's dangle."

He had been delayed by the two dogs' resistance to railway rules and regulations and before he reached the Comet the Limited was whistling for the Dome Mountain curve. They made a dash down the long hill, arriving at the station at the same moment as the long train. A mad scramble for tickets and checks, two excited dogs literally thrown into the open door of the baggage car, and Ed swung aboard just as the train got under way.

As he made his way down the aisle of the day coach, he was delighted to discover that Hughes, the middle-aged superintendent of the fish hatchery on Twenty Mile Lake, was travelling that morning. Last summer Ed had worked for the quiet mannered nature lover, and more than once since he had told himself that as soon as he could spare the time he was going over the range into the Twenty Mile country to renew acquaintance with his former employer.

"Funny t' see you travelling this time of year, Mr. Hughes," Ed grinned. "Trout and such-like all safely under the ice for a while yet, aren't they?"

"Yes. But I'm not on the trail of trout this trip. Nor salmon either. This side of Summit I leave the railway and head back into the hills to get the lay of

some feeder streams running into the only lake of its kind in this whole country."

"What kind of a lake's that?" Ed wanted to know. Always he remembered the graphic story Hughes had told him of Half-moon Lake over in the Twenty Mile country. It was a tale he could never forget. And now he sensed that Hughes might have yet another of his unusual nature stories to tell. A story which, like his others, dealt not with birds or animals, but with the dwellers of that little known under-water world which interested him so intensely.

"A black bass lake," Hughes told him.

"Black bass? Why, they're eastern fish aren't they? Never heard of any being west of the Rockies."

"Until a few years ago there never were. Even after they were imported they were all but annihilated. It's a story of a tremendously plucky fight. Would you like to hear about it?"

And then, seeing the eagerness in Ed's eyes, and knowing that in this young frontiersman he would have an understanding listener, the soft-spoken fish culturalist settled himself in his seat and told the story of the warring stranger.

Hughes came down from the cabin, got into his battered skiff and pushed off to row across the nar-

row stretch where the shores of Goat Lake converged to form the outlet channel leading to the falls. The shadows of the Pacific Coast maples behind the beaches ahead were stretching across the water like cool fingers and already the conifers cloaking the west side of the valley held a suggestion of the purple haze which sunset releases. Among the uneven line of peaks flanking the pass to the north the June sun was streaking the fields of snow with bold brush strokes of gold and rose. Hughes was going to the flat rock to see if the lone black bass had found a mate.

Three years before, a small shipment of young black bass had been brought across the mountains and released in Goat Lake, to which, as to all waters of the Northern Pacific slope, they were foreign. But the experiment had failed, cannibal fish had soon devoured nearly all the under-water pioneers and now at their first breeding season the fish culturalist feared that only one remained. The coarse fish and the few big Dolly Vardens had defeated the attempt to establish a colony of the hardy eastern fighters. As far as he knew, only one bass had reached maturity, and in his skiff he had drifted over all the likely places, peering into the clear water, hoping and yet despairing of discovering other survivors.

As he approached the stretch of gravel bottom

near the flat rock, he heard a wallowing splash and circles spread, lazily undulating the spired reflection of a cottonwood, where the heavy fish had broken water. That, he knew, was the big Dolly Varden which for years at this season had lurked near the rock to gorge on smaller fish. More than any other enemy, more even than the strangeness of surroundings and of forage, this great fish of prey had been responsible for the defeat of the colony of bass, and because it was crafty and well fed it had outwitted him in all his attempts to capture it.

The man rested on his oars and let the boat drift over the patch of gravel near the rock. Shifting his position on the thwart and shading the surface with his old felt hat, he watched the bottom until he saw below him the circular nest of clean pebbles. A faint whirl of disturbed silt showed him where the solitary guardian had sprung to action when the shadow of the boat floated over his domain. While he watched, the sturdy fish appeared, darted across the nest and cruised truculently about it, ready to defend it against even so gigantic an invader.

As he took up the oars, the splash of the feeding Dolly Varden again broke the quiet which overlay the muffled drumming thunder of the falls.

"Wish I'd got rid of you," Hughes said aloud. Several times during the first days the young bass

were in the lake, he had seen the great char ranging the shallows like a wolf hot on the trail of helpless prey, and since then it must have devoured others in places and at times when only under-water eyes could mark the slaughter.

As the skiff moved up the shore the man thought of the lake as it might have been had sufficient bass survived. There were places here which resembled the favorite haunts of small mouth black bass he had known in the East more than thirty years ago. They might have thrived had not the odds against them been so overwhelming.

He rowed half-way up the lake, crossed it and came down the shallows along the eastern side. Often he stood and searched the bottom, hoping he might discover a second nest and perhaps a pair of bass, but though he surprised many a phlegmatic sucker and coarse, ungainly squawfish, he saw no sign of the Eastern thoroughbreds.

The shadows were being dissolved into the growing indistinctness of the dusk and in the pass the colors of the afterglow were fading from the slopes of snow when he returned to the landing stage before the shake-roofed cabin. For a week now the male bass had been unmated and surely if there were even one female in the lake he would have found her.

He thought of the solitary pioneer over there near

the flat rock. Undaunted by adversity he had built his nest and now though it could never be used he guarded it unceasingly. During his life in the solitudes Hughes had seen many a losing fight with adversity and now, vaguely, he knew that the harsh law of these cathedral valleys would overwhelm another gallant living thing.

He moored his skiff and went slowly up the trail to the cabin squatting below the dark wall of the brooding firs.

On a stretch of gravel bottom where an eastern river curved indolently across lush meadowlands Sturdy-fins, the future warrior of Goat Lake, was born.

For cloudless weeks the strengthening sun had been tempering the water and in the mellow light coming down through the dimpling surface the under-water vegetation had grown quickly until by June the scars of freshet time were overgrown and in the warm shallows Sturdy-fins and the others of his brood could feed abundantly. This was the nursery to which their male parent had convoyed them. For a week he had watched over them constantly, poising close by when they rose from the nest in daytime, herding them down at evening to seek the shelter of the stones, until, his close vigil ended, he had left them in the

shallows and gone to mid-river to break his lengthy fast. Had he come upon any of his offspring after he began to feed he would not have hesitated to devour them. But among the trails and clearings between the islands of water plants they were safe, except for the flashing swoop of the kingfisher which many times each day swept overhead with staccato bursts of angry sound, and for the few cunning larger fish that ranged the shallows under cover of the dark.

Of the brood only a few weaklings were to be devoured there. One forenoon while Sturdy-fins and the others ate ravenously where a wisp of current brought food to them down a channel between the matted watercress, a crouching figure came stealthily along the bank. It paused, stooped lower, crept upon them and a fine dip-net descended to whisk them through the air and into a waiting bucket.

In the small hatchery nearby they were reared until they were two inches long and then the order came that the experimental shipment for the mountain lake three thousand miles away was to go forward. Sturdy-fins and many of his brood were loaded into tanks and placed upon a train. Day and night skilled attendants watched them until at last they were taken from the express car, placed in

smaller cans and borne by packhorses up the winding pony trail from the settlement to where Goat Lake dreamed between its mountains. Two hours later they were free.

In eager twos and threes the hardier ones left the huddled school beside the mouths of the submerged cans and advanced into the unknown, skirmishing out across the shallows in a fan-shaped line. As the rim of shadow from the westward mountains crept up the eastern sidehills the school at the releasing place dwindled and disappeared while the young adventurers scouted farther into these strange feeding grounds. Prompted by some restless instinct a few ranged northward avoiding the deep water, pushing valiantly on toward the shoals at the head of the lake a mile away.

But Sturdy-fins and the rest were content to explore the shallows at the lower end. Here was water different than in their birth-place near Lake Erie; there the river brought the strong tang of limestone from its scourged upper reaches, and here the wastage from the summer snows which fed the lake was flat and tasteless; the water plants, all things they fed upon, were unlike those on that distant river not one of them would ever swim again. But because they came of a hardy breed, they were not daunted

by the strangeness of it all. Stout of heart and quick of body they went forward into waters no black bass had ever seen before.

Though Sturdy-fins, the strongest swimmer of them all, held a place in the vanguard of exploration, he did not push ahead with the rashness which brought disaster to many of his comrades. He possessed an instinctive wariness which served him well during those first encounters with a host of cunning foes.

Unhampered by the schooling instinct, he did not seek to join the groups of other bass, but swam forward alone, keeping well up from the broken driftwood littering the bottom, avoiding the forests of water parsnip and tule jungles, rounding each turn poised for flight or for pursuit of quarry.

The sun had left the water and freed it of the swaying, disconcerting shadows. The surface was placid, unsmirched by even the gentlest breath of air, when passing above the grotesque tentacles of an upturned alder stump, he saw a school of new-hatched squawfish straight ahead.

Sinuous, flabby things they were, and as their dark, large-headed bodies moved in a sluggish cloud, he charged, confident of prey. He came upon them from behind, driving through them, snatching them into his strong jaws and when he had slashed his way

through the panic-stricken school he swung sharply about and charged a second time. They would not scatter and it would be easy for him to herd them up and down the shallows and feast on them until darkness interceded and wrapped the harried survivors in its protecting cloak. It was to make war on these coarse creatures, unfit for food or sport, that the aggressive eastern fish had been brought to these mountain waters, and Sturdy-fins, fighter and pioneer, had launched the first assault.

His first rush had driven in the stragglers and when he turned to strike again the front ranks turned inward and made the disorder greater. He shot through them a second time, baffling them by the abruptness of his charge. Forgotten now was his former weariness and in his lust for slaughter all his senses were intent upon the cloud of helpless fry.

Two feet below, against a slab of water-logged fir bark, a mottled body shifted position craftily. A wide, flat head and two stiff pectoral fins braced against the dark bottom and then a bluntly tapering body scurried out to lie again as moveless as the bark itself. The front fins jerked once more, the tail lashed out and the bullhead rose with vicious speed.

Sturdy-fins was turning to plunge again into the host of fry when he saw his enemy close upon his flank. A wild flip shot him aside and the bullhead's

snapping jaws came short. Unadapted for quick manœuvering it floundered as it tried to throw itself upon the stocky, broad-flanked fish but Sturdy-fins dodged up, then down, cleared the dark snout by a scant inch and sped away. Sulkily the stalker of the littered bottom glided defeated to his lair.

Close below the dull ceiling which dusk was laying on the surface, Sturdy-fins sped to gain less dangerous water close to shore. As he neared it he came upon a small leech wavering like a blood-red pennant as it labored toward the weeds and in one short rush he caught it, threw it aside, then bolted it greedily, his gill covers straining to force down the heavy morsel.

Triumphantly he moved on and saw a fresh-water shrimp mounting a stalk with fumbling legs. The thing resembled the young crayfish of his home river and he went confidently closer.

Suddenly the weed jungle swayed tempestuously and a vortex caught him broadside, turned him over, drew him toward the weeds and at the same instant a grey-green head came at him from the ambush and the jaw of a full-grown squawfish spread to close on him and crush him between the tooth-like bones set within its throat. By this quick spreading of its mouth the squawfish had created the whirl of water which would suck its prey inside the smooth mem-

brane of its toothless jaws. Sturdy-fins, staggering, chanced to stab the yellow skin below the jaw with his erect dorsal spines and the big fish, flinching, lost its brief instant of opportunity. It rammed forward but, like the bullhead, it was too sluggish to overtake the agile, dodging bass. In and out among the weed clumps Sturdy-fins sped away.

He was in deeper water now, the bottom was pitching sharply into the vague depths of the lake floor when he sighted two other bass ahead of him. They separated and joined erratically as they foraged the warm strata just below the surface. One had turned to worry a drowned grey moth, and Sturdy-fins, covetous of the titbit, was speeding forward when below the moth he saw a warning glint of white as the big Dolly Varden, careening upward, exposed its underside to the failing light. The bass beside the moth was seized and the great tail sent boiling eddies to the surface to mark the place where the young adventurer had perished.

This was not the first bass to be devoured by the great cannibal who ruled these mountain waters, since it had moved out from the flat rock to feed that evening. While the tree shadows still stretched over the lake he had prowled along the edge of shoal. He was the overlord of that under-water kingdom, his lair the safe reach beside the flat rock, his hunting

grounds the edge of shallow and the outlet channel. He held for himself the most abundant feeding grounds, exacted heavy toll on all the lesser fish, and in the months which were to follow he became the arch enemy of the young strangers from the East that had been brought there to menace his undisputed rule. More than any other living thing in Goat Lake he depleted their too scanty numbers. Even had they all survived none would have attained his length and weight, and yet in years to come he was to be challenged by one of them whose courage and tenacity of purpose were greater than his own.

Sturdy-fins hastened to the shallows and sought a place where he could not be ambushed by lurkers in the weeds or driftwood tangles of the bottom. There he lay while all shapes were merged into the unpatterned blanket of the night. The evening feeding time was over, in mid-lake a pair of loons laughed cruelly and below the surface hunters and hunted lay with slowly moving fins to await the return of light.

The following spring, when the dwellers in Goat Lake came from the depths to seek their summer haunts, of the scores of black bass that had cruised the lower end of the lake the previous summer, only three remained. The few, who on the day of their release had gone directly up the lake, had either

perished or had found haunts which suited them, for none returned to join the survivors.

Sturdy-fins, lustiest and most knowing of the three, led the short migration shoreward, and because the flat rock and its surroundings resembled reaches of his Eastern river, he instinctively chose it for his own. There on sunny afternoons, the breeze caressed the rock with purling wavelets and in its lee a few yellow water lilies spread canopies beneath which he could drowse. The drift of the current was toward the outlet channel a hundred yards along the sweeping curve of shore, and the jutting rock ledge narrowed the broad shallows to a passage through which traveling fish must go. Here was choice hunting and though the char resented his invasion, Sturdy-fins persisted. Many times the spotted body of the big fish charged but each time the doughty poacher got away unscathed. The other two, following the example of Sturdy-fins, remained close by and raided the preserves of the sullen monarch. And then one evening in July the char had its revenge.

Until mid-day the air had been sultry, then black clouds had billowed over the crest of the range and released a pelting rain which pebbled the surface with transient bubbles and beat down a host of flying things that in the calm of evening lay bedraggled and unable to rise. Here was a rare variety of fare

and the trio ranged close below the surface, snatching down the soft bodies, foraging with ease. Below them in the gloom the spotted monarch prowled.

A limp-winged honey bee struggled spasmodically, ruffling a disc of surface with its futile vibrations. The three young bass converged upon the prize.

Unseen beneath them a long shadow drifted upward. Tail and white-edged fins seemed hardly to move until when it had halved the distance it rushed upon them. They scattered, but the hooked teeth crunched across the belly of the nearest bass and it was borne down, maimed, to be eaten in the vague depths while Sturdy-fins and the other survivor fled for the shelter of the lily pads.

All summer the ceaseless war went on. When the char pressed the fight the two retreated only to appear again in the disputed water near the rock. No squaw-fish nor bullhead in the lake dare attack them now and few days passed in which they did not kill some of the smaller among their former enemies. Only the largest were immune from sudden, fierce attack, and then in August an osprey rocketing from the sky left Sturdy-fins to wage the fight alone.

In the fall while the grasses cloaking the banks of his far-off home drooped motionless and heavy with seed in the haze of Indian summer days, out here the rains began. The great firs and cedars, rising tier on

tier like giants in an amphitheatre, were twined with scarves of rising mist. The water did not freeze in winter and for many days the surface was stippled with the steady rain.

The winters here were strange to Sturdy-fins. Some breeds of fish would have been oppressed and killed by the unfamiliarity of it all, but brave adventurer that he was, he battled on alone. He was a warrior who gave no quarter and who expected none.

He stayed always at the lower end of the lake and after the osprey's swift descent he saw no other bass. Mountains, hundreds of miles of forest and water separated him from the country of his birth. He was an outpost in a hostile land.

In the spring of his maturity, when the dogwood blossoms flecked the darker mass of conifers, he came up from his winter retreat, ate mightily and by June was in prime condition. Then, prompted by the mating urge, he began to make a nest.

He chose a site midway between the rock and the outlet channel where the water flowed slowly across a gravel patch. As his father had done in that Eastern stream, he turned the small stones, moved them in the nest to suit his fancy, fanned them clean with pulsating beats of his fins and slower sweeps of his tail.

He was an exacting builder. Several times when

the nest seemed finished he altered its precise arrangement, shifting some of the larger stones, tugging to dislodge a tuft of weed root, fanning out the last vestiges of silt.

One morning a sucker, longer than himself, came idling along the bottom toward him and directly he saw it, Sturdy-fins left his work and rose threateningly. The sucker was unconscious of its danger as it stopped to press its tapering snout against the silt. A stocky form flashed through the screen of water its burrowings had raised, dealt it a staggering blow on its rounded side and raked it with sharp teeth which sought a hold on tail or fins. Galvanized with fright the intruder scurried off and the bass swam grandly back to the nest he was determined to defend.

When the nest was arranged to suit his fancy, Sturdy-fins went in search of a mate. Each day he coursed the waters along the lake end with which he was familiar, and when his search failed his cruises became more erratic, his quick returns to the nest more savage. Each evening he swam back to hover there, each dawn he renewed his quest. Sometimes as he skirted the shallows he would turn inshore, circle and dodge among the weed beds and sunken logs only to leave them and go on and on, tireless and persevering.

His restlessness increased with each day's failure;

more and more he concentrated on the hundred yards of channel leading to the falls. Here the water flowed easily between reed-walled banks until, constricted by two buttresses of rock, it quickened, snarled among the stones which gashed it, then fell in a torn curtain to the ledges forty feet below.

One morning he came perilously close to the bottleneck above the falls, then, warned by the treacherous clutch of the current, fought free and swam into the safe reaches of the channel. But an hour later he came down again.

This second time he went fairly into the rapid and when he tried to move upstream the slipping water sucked him close to the brink of the falls so that he had to struggle desperately to regain every inch separating him from the safety he had so rashly left. For a steelhead trout or other streamline fish it would have been a mighty effort, but for him, with his deep, blunt body, it seemed impossible. His tail drove against the water, his fins worked furiously and yet he hung there barely holding his own. He was unable to move ahead, and behind him he could feel the booming vibration of the falls.

For a full minute he held his position and then as the tireless current bested him the fatal backward drift began. Failure to keep his head into the very eye of the fast water would instantly have turned

him broadside and he would have been swept over the brink. Now that he was drifting backward inch by inch he had less steering way and only his agile fins kept him from being quickly overpowered.

A bar of sunlight slanted through an opening in the thatch of cedar boughs above and lay where the torn surface bent downward on the brink. At first there had been six inches between the sunlight and the thrusting tail, now there were but two—and now the tail had crossed the line.

Where the water lashed the uneven face of rock that walled it in were tossing eddies, and cautiously, still striving to prevent the backward drift, Sturdy-fins edged toward them. His dorsal fin was midway in the bar of sunlight as he sidled, but rallying mightily, he worked across, then as he came nearer, shot ahead and gained the last of those scant shelters. For ten minutes he poised there, steadying himself against the lifting surge and fall of the water, then darted to the next, rested and swung to midstream to take refuge behind a slab of rock. Ten minutes later he forged out of the bottle-neck of rapids into safety.

Most fish, even the steelhead trout or cohoe salmon, would have rested in the slack water of the channel after such a battle, but Sturdy-fins, though less suited than they for such a struggle, did not even pause. His nest must be kept from molestation even

though it would be useless if he could not find a mate to share it. In his home river more than one of his forbears had died to repel invaders from their nests and Sturdy-fins was worthy of the best traditions of his fighting stock.

He cleared the channel and moved quickly westward toward his stretch of gravel bottom. Over a sunken log that sloped from the shallows into the dimness of the lake, past the slender stalks of tule clusters he sped, then coming sharply around a hummock of roots, he sighted his nest. Wavelets rolled twisting ribbons of light and shadow over the familiar bottom and there he saw, moving insolently above it, the long body of the char.

In the creed of the small mouth black bass, odds are never reckoned at a time like this. His resentment at his days of futile searching, the enmity against the bullying overlord that had grown during months and years, united in a great wave of anger, filled him with a passion to destroy this smooth-skinned, spotted fish that had opposed him for so long.

The Dolly Varden was three times the weight of Sturdy-fins, but had he been ten times his size, the angry bass would not have flinched. Hard and fast he drove straight at the unprotected flank, in an assault so vicious and unexpected that before the Dolly

Varden could twist aside it was struck a glancing blow. It churned about, then lunged.

But before that manœuvre was completed the audacious bass had closed again and this time his aim was perfect. One of the fan-like pectoral fins, edged with white, was rammed into his open mouth and his strong jaws closed upon it.

In its frenzy the char rolled completely over, scraping the bass against the bottom but failing to break that bulldog grip. Incapable of balance it tried to swim, only to be snubbed short by the lashing body it must tow. Billowing clouds of silt were kicked up so that the unevenly matched opponents fought in semi-darkness.

The Dolly Varden lurched suddenly upright, lashed out fiercely against the bottom with its spread tail and rose in a twisting sweep, then head and tail almost meeting, it straightened so abruptly that the clenched teeth of the bass tore off the membranes and the fin was shaken free.

The char, furious as a crazed wolf, confident of victory, rammed at the lighter fish before he had righted himself and seized him full across the back immediately behind the dorsal fin. Sturdy-fins' body lashed and writhed but the hooked teeth held in his tough skin. The char dived heavily, shot along the bottom and collided head on with a flat stone so that the

lighter fish was pinned against it. Sturdy-fins' straining gills drew in the swirling silt and all but stifled him.

The char's jaws bore more heavily upon his straining sides. The rear spine of his dorsal fin stabbed through the skin of the Dolly Varden's cheek but the latter took that trifling punishment and never for an instant lessened its death grip. Twist and turn as he might, Sturdy-fins could not break away. He was cornered, his struggles were becoming less violent and because of the silt choking him he could not continue for long.

A minute passed and, though he did not move, the muscles of his flanks were taut with the steady strain he put upon them. A sucker, squawfish, any of the coarse fish in the lake, would have gone limp under the terrible constriction, but Sturdy-fins, staunch-hearted descendant of a warrior clan, showed no sign of surrender.

His tail, curved against the smooth side of the stone, straightened and, jolting the head of the big fish, tore the needle-pointed dorsal spine from the skin of its cheek and pricked its eye. Involuntarily the char lurched.

That gave Sturdy-fins his chance. Rallying gloriously he broke free, slithered along the side of the stone and was gone.

The char swung upward, shot over the stone to overtake its enemy before it lost him in the maze of weed beds. But it did not know the black bass breed. Instead of fleeing, Sturdy-fins, panting, bruised, his skin bearing a raw welt where the big jaws had held him, went no farther than his nest. There he made his last stand and the Dolly Varden coming over the boulder received the full force of his terrific charge. Once more the jaws of the bass closed on the frayed pectoral fin, crumpling it like a withered leaf, crushing the tough bones close to its base.

Half blinded, unprepared for this second assault, the char cut upward in erratic spirals and floundered on the surface, its thrashing tail beating the water to a froth. But grim as death the smaller fish held fast. The char went into a flurry of rolling, then towing its attacker, dived again. The hold was still unbroken when they struck the bottom.

Once again the char lashed furiously with its tail, kicking itself along the bottom in short jerks, struggling with such violence to right itself that as it renewed its frenzied rolling, bones and membrane could stand the strain no longer and all but the knobby base of the fin came away in the jaws of the bass.

Viciously Sturdy-fins returned to the assault, but the big fish was beaten. It was crippled, unable to swim except in short rushes and its only thought was

to escape. Plunging down the sloping bottom it sought the depths of the lake floor. Down and down they went while the victor struck again and again. Then when they were in the great gloom fifty feet below the surface the conqueror left off the chase and rose toward shore.

A mink, thin-flanked and with an insatiable litter to feed, had disturbed the fish at the north end of the lake. Many suckers, squawfish and some smaller char had been destroyed by it; other fish were seeking more protected feeding places because of the constant peril of its presence, and with them had come the only survivor of the little band of bass that had gone up the lake shore years before. It was a female, larger than Sturdy-fins, and now heavy with eggs; she passed along the shaded lane below the side of the flat rock.

Sturdy-fins, rising triumphantly from the depths, saw her as he neared his nest. He swept to meet her, swam around her in narrow circles, trying his utmost to entice her to accompany him. This was the supreme moment of his hard-fought day.

The female affected indifference. She idled shoreward, paused, went on. But in courtship as in battle Sturdy-fins would not admit defeat. He came alongside, nipped her flank tenderly, moved off in the direc-

tion of his nest in an invitation for her to follow. He turned back, swam about her, gently trying to guide her to his patch of gravel.

Finally she came. Once more shadows lay across the water. Once more dusk seeped down the valley to hide the nest and the pair of pioneers who had won their long fight in territory hostile to them. And next day Hughes, as his skiff drifted over the nest, learned that at last Sturdy-fins had found a mate and knew that in years to come the courageous bass would have reinforcements in the war he had waged so long alone.

After Hughes left the train and the snow-covered mountain flag station, even during the day's activity at Summit City as he prepared to take the Quartz Creek trail next morning, this story from the little known under-water world had a foremost place in Ed's mind.

"Some day I'm going to get into that fish culture game," he promised himself.

But when he confided his dream to Devon, the old-timer shook his head. "Feller needs to be a bit o' a scientist for that, son," he warned. "Folks like you an' me—we ain't got the trainin'."

"Sure, but there must be an end to the business

where an outdoor man, a fellow who knows the bush and rivers and things, could be useful."

"Mebbe," Devon agreed doubtfully. But it was not until several years later that he realized how close to the truth this reluctant admission had come.

During the arduous trip to Quartz Creek and back, Ed thought much of ways in which he might become a useful member of Hughes' roving crew. Then with his return to Summit City all plans for the future were forgotten because of the grim demands of the immediate present. Nor did Ed realize how sinister a fight he had on his hands until that evening when the scheming Williams talked to him.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR THE CODE

"An' if it so happens you *should* get held up on the trail so's not to tip Berkett off in time, well—o' course—" The speaker winked meaningly and let the shrug of his fat shoulders tell his thoughts with a subtlety which plain words could not convey.

From where he sat watchfully in the shadows at the end of Devon's log-walled cabin Mac saw by the changing expression of the face he knew so well that the words the stout man spoke did not please his master. His forelegs stiffened, the powerful muscles of his haunches grew tense as he looked at this young man he adored and served, this youth whose litheness and travel-worn, outdoor garb were strangely contrasted with the heavy body and conventional clothes of the other, and as his intent eyes rested on him Mac slowly came to his feet.

He saw his master turn sharply on the older man. "Why you handin' me a line like that?" Ed demanded. "I guess you heard me say I'd get the warning to Berkett as fast as anybody kin mush that Beaver Falls trail."

"Keep your shirt on, son. Mebbeso you got a little

account t' settle with Berkett," the other grinned. "Anyhow I said 'if,' didn't I? Sometimes it don't pay to be in too big a hurry. Suppose now," he began insinuatingly, then stopped and watched Ed with a calculating eye, realized that the young man did not grasp his subtle meaning and was about to venture some more open suggestion when he saw Devon come quickly to his feet.

The grizzled old-timer for whom Ed had been driving mail team that winter did not speak immediately. But simply by standing up he seemed to dwarf all other things in the low-ceilinged room even as the shrewd honesty of his weather-beaten face reduced the stout man's smile to a smirk of scheming pettiness. And Mac, who had already started to edge closer to his master, sat down again as if convinced that the exasperating person near the door was about to be satisfactorily dealt with by this old man he trusted.

"Holt onto yer jerkline, Williams," Devon advised with quiet irony. "When Ed and me say we'll shoot the warning to Berkett we mean just that—and not one thing more or less. See?"

"Mebbe I see—mebbe I don't."

"Then just you 'tend t' what I'm saying. If you're tradin' on that rumor about a bust-up 'tween Berkett and Ed here, you're sadly out of luck. Poor

Berkett's had his lesson. I know Ed here and don't you get to nursin' fool notions about the lad sittin' back now and lettin' Berkett be tricked by any tin-horn speculator. We know as well as you the big chance Berkett has for a clean-up. Ed and me are all set to see he gets it."

"Yes?" Williams seemed scornful. Had he been a courageous man he would have voiced his contempt, but after eyeing them as if to reveal the hidden motive of what, to him, seemed a doubtful proposal, he gave them a curt "good night" and left the cabin.

Devon's steady eyes rested on the closed door and then, looking at the big black and white leader in the corner, he nodded slowly as if agreeing with the dog. "You got his number, Mac," he rumbled. "All same coyote dolled up in store clothes. Ed," he went on with conviction, "that son-of-a-gun thinks we're aimin' to run a sandy on the folks here in Summit City. He don't believe we're going to play straight with Berkett. He thinks we're talking this way so's to get onto the ground first. We'll show him. Better get away to-night. What dogs you want?"

"Can I have Ike and Ginger?"

"Sure. Use any of 'em. Taking Derry?"

"Like to. Have to leave him with you though. That shoulder wound isn't hardened up yet."

"All right. Those two and Mac'll make a *skookum*

team. Mac'll get you there. He'll sure keep old Ike and Ginger battin' right along."

Devon snapped his fingers and when Mac stalked grandly to lay his muzzle on his knee, the old man fondled the ears of this huge, half-wild creature whose superb qualities were fast gaining him a reputation on the trail and in the settlements. In his day the old mail contractor had known most of the famed dogs of the Northland but never had he known one that showed greater promise than Mac. The very fact that he held himself aloof from almost all humans and that in his wild heart and mind were all the savage wisdom he had learned from the wolf dogs with whom in his younger days he had hunted and fought, made his unfailing allegiance to Ed Sibley seem all the more remarkable. "Yep, he can do everything but talk," Devon mused aloud. "An' critters that just talk—critters like that Williams, don't ring any bells with me. You're the dog for this job, Mac," he added as he gave the big leader a farewell pat.

It was midnight when Ed bid Derry a reluctant farewell and harnessed Mac and Devon's two huskies. Then with a lightly loaded sled he started on that trying journey which would take him for three days through unsettled country until he reached the solitary cabin at Beaver Falls. As he jogged at the gee pole with the swishing song of the steelshod run-

ners in his ears and with only the throbbing stars to show him the backs of his trotting dogs, he felt the deep-rooted satisfaction which always comes when a difficult job is tackled in sound, straightforward fashion. Double-cross poor Berkett? He'd show them.

From the top of the long hill he looked back toward where the settlement slept beneath the thick blanket of the night. "Wonder what kind of crooked game that stiff Williams wants to play," he thought as he paused for one last look into the valley below. He chuckled softly when Mac looked back to see why his master was lagging. "Just rarin' to eat up trail to-night, old boy?" Ed asked. "Guess you want to show 'em you and me know how to play the game with Berkett. He's changed. You'll like him now."

Mac's brush waved in response. Once before he had been over this trail to Beaver Falls. Berkett was away, somewhere on his trapline probably, when they passed. But he knew his former enemy lived there. And by the dog's actions Ed sensed that Mac had forgotten the feud.

With his wide chest bearing hard on the collar he started on, drawn forward by the veiled excitement of this secret start, somehow sensing the responsibility that was his, the trust his master placed in him

to take them unerringly past all the windings of the dim trail to Beaver Falls.

It was in truth a straight game which Devon and Ed Sibley were playing with Berkett. For they were intent on giving him the news that—if he played his cards aright—he need not know the privation and harsh struggle which had been his here and in the upper country.

Like most momentous tidings, the news of the splendid future in store for Beaver Falls had come quietly to Summit City. Only that afternoon Devon had heard it from Division, the main town west along the railway. A big corporation was going to erect a pulp and paper mill on the lower Beaver. They must have water power and Beaver Falls along with Berkett's pre-emption adjoining it, must be bought by them. "What a chance for some slicker to cheat Berkett of his chance," Devon had said when he had asked if Ed would make the trip.

There lay the menace to the self-condemned outcast. But Ed, in spite of Williams, did not consider it more than a remote danger until, soon after they passed the forks where the main trail from Division joined the Summit City trail, Mac's sudden change of manner warned him that they were not travelling the trail to Beaver Falls alone that night.

The spired evergreens, cloaked in their greatcoats

of snow, made a dark tunnel of the hard-packed trail, converted it to a sombre place where even the half-light of the starry sky could not go. Sight was useless and Ed, his hands on the gee pole, was letting Mac take them quickly through it when without warning the team stopped so suddenly that the sled piled onto the heels of Ike, the wheeler. He yipped his complaint to the dogs ahead and as Ed crowded past him in order to see what the trouble was he found Mac with body aggressively poised and head stretched forward as if seeking to discover the source of the warning his keen nostrils had detected.

"What's up?" Ed asked. "Trail's all clear, isn't it?" Mac glanced sharply up at him then gave a warning growl. He seemed to know that human sight and hearing were useless and when Ed stepped ahead he tried roughly to crowd past him, tried to make his master understand that he alone knew how to deal with the threat which had come to him out of the blackness of the night. Ed pushed him back but instantly Mac brought Ike and Ginger into their collars with an imperative, short-clipped bark and took them forward on the trot.

"Mebbe you sniffed wolf," Ed suggested, but could he have followed the intent glances of his dog he would have known that no prowler in the shadowed woods had prompted the sudden change in Mac. At

every few steps the big leader put his muzzle to the trail and when he found the lingering scent there a half-suppressed growl rumbled from his throat. Ed stopped and struck a light but he found no signs on the hard-packed trail. He stepped aside and let the team go past then swung in behind the sled. Mac broke into a run and with Ike and Ginger also infected with his strange impatience he swept on until suddenly rounding a low rock bluff they saw the red glow of a campfire through the columned trunks immediately ahead. Mac barked challengingly, the clamor of a dozen malamutes rang out and almost before Ed could get to the head of his team the strange dogs raced forward. He repulsed them savagely and as they came to a stop in the trail beside the campfire a tall man came out to meet him.

"Headed the wrong way, aren't you?" The stranger's words came as an assertion of fact, not a question.

"Nope," Ed retorted and even as he struggled to hold Mac from lunging at the restless huskies prowling just out of reach, he read some sinister design in the big sled drawn across the trail to block it, in the grinning faces of the two half-breed drivers and in the white man's uncompromising attitude.

"Take my tip—you *are* headed the wrong way," the man went on grimly. "Your trail lies that way

—Summit City way. I know who you're working for, and where you're going and the slick way your boss got you out of town. But me and my friends are wise to him. If you're sensible you'll head back. I want nobody in the trail ahead of me for the next few days. How about it? A couple hundred dollars any good to you?"

Until that moment Ed had kept his anger under control but at the insinuating suggestion of those last words, at the man's bland confidence that for money he would betray his employer and the lonely pioneer of Beaver Falls, he forgot the danger to himself and his dogs. Now he understood why Williams had come to find out if he were really going and at the remembrance of that flaccid, scheming face he saw with vivid clearness the whole odious plan. He lifted his hand from Mac's collar to confront this accomplice of Williams' but before he could reach him he heard a roar of primitive rage as Mac leaped upon the shifty malamutes that taunted him. Dimly he saw the half-breed drivers rush forward and wheeled in time to see their ten dogs surge like a snarling wave upon his hopelessly outnumbered team.

For Mac, battling under the handicap of the collar and the wild lunges of the two dogs in the traces behind him, the attacking pack was not the ultimate

object of his assault, were but a minor force which must be routed before he could ally himself with his master against the man who had barred their way. Unlike Ginger and Ike he scorned to fight with his flank protected by the sled; he plunged and slashed, leaped clear and plunged again, berserk with red passion, scornful of the flesh wounds the keen fangs of the enemy inflicted on haunch and shoulder. And when at last the clubs of the Indian drivers had driven back the attackers his white chest was blood spattered but his great spirit still unbeaten. He saw Ike prone and twitching upon the snow, saw Ginger cowering beside the sled as he licked a dangling forepaw and then somehow, although his master was unharmed, he sensed that he had lost the fight.

Two hours later in a makeshift camp a short distance down the trail, Ed's revolver shattered the silence of the drab dawn, the mutilated bodies of Ike and Ginger suffered no longer and by his master's grim and haggard face the big dog knew the real fight was far from finished. By that strange telepathy which deepens understanding between dog and man who have roved far into the solitude of the wilderness, he knew his master was desperate, was battling with his back to the wall. With a gruff tenderness unusual to him, Mac came slowly to where Ed squatted beside the meagre fire, whined an

anxious inquiry and prodded Ed with his muzzle to make him look at him.

"Old lad . . . good old lad," Ed muttered. But his eyes did not turn away from the flickering light, for he was thinking, planning, weighing the desperate odds against him, putting all his hard-earned knowledge of winter travel to work on the scheme to still beat Williams' accomplice to Beaver Falls—to still win the race against dishonour. And as he crouched there with his arm thrown across the blood-stained shoulders of this loyal partner in a cause which was all but lost, Ed did not see the dancing flames. In spirit he was high above the ragged line of timber over the Beaver River range, fighting his way through the torturing miles of rocks and barrens and cruel wind of the altitudes. Eighteen hours without a fire, without hot food, without rest—eighteen hours at least of heavy breaking through the treacherous, drifted snow of the divide. Yes, that was the best time he could make up there—and if he failed—

Ed stirred and, almost fiercely, took the splendid head of his lead dog in his hands. "If we fail, old sidekick—well, we don't come down, that's all. It'll be a millin' trip—mebbe I shouldn't take you, but you and me's been *tillicums, nika tillicums,* haven't we—like old Alec said."

Leaning forward, affectionately, almost yearningly, Mac lowered his head and pressed it against Ed's chest while a soft rumbling sound bubbled from his throat. Though the words conveyed no meaning, the veiled desire, the desperation and cold resolve of the voice he adored thrilled him. And Ed, afraid lest he be betrayed by the sentiment within him, rose briskly and began to strip his pack of all but the bare essentials. Within half-an-hour they started. Before noon they swung out of the trail along which their adversary with his hired teams was speeding farther from them. Then they struck up through the deep snow of the sidehill leading to the high divide whose other side led down to Beaver Falls. The trail that Williams' accomplice followed swung eastward in a wide arc. The pass above led straight, but they must climb seven thousand feet to reach its entrance! And so that night they made an uncomfortable, cheerless camp on a wind-swept ridge close below timberline.

Before the stars, like bright flotsam, had drifted out of the heavens on the creeping tide of dawn, they were on their way once more, and as day broadened and noon came and they battled for each hard-won mile across the range, Mac gave unstintingly of the best that was in him. Even under the handicap of the light pack which Ed had cinched across his back

just behind the shoulders, he came forward to take his turn at breaking, and while Ed, on snowshoes, came slowly on behind, the big dog leaped and leaped again, beat down a narrow trench through the soft snow, wallowed on a yard, a foot at a time, charging, staggering, but ever renewing the fight until Ed called for him to stop. But even when Ed went ahead the dog crowded close to his snowshoe heels and if Ed stopped to recover his breath he tried to get past him, impatient to beat down the powdery stuff which tried to hold them back.

The cheerless sun slipped lower, the shadows reached farther from the base of the westward peaks and in the lessening light the trench they had beaten down was filled with bluish shadow, a shadow as inexorable as the unrelenting wind itself, dispassionate, hostile to these two living atoms that dared encroach beyond the boundaries which held back all other forms of life. At dusk they stopped and Ed, squatting in the trail, shared with his dog a few scraps of frozen food. Mac crunched his, head down, back to the cutting sweep of wind, and then they moved slowly on as the bitter dusk came down.

"That confounded wind—don't it ever let up?" Ed panted as with shoulders hunched, he followed in Mac's wake. He was beginning to hate that wind. It plucked at his face, at his toil-wearied limbs,

seemed to want to topple him backward to the snow, to drift it over him, flatten him into the deadly monotony of white. Its very soundlessness fretted him—if only there were trees for it to sing through—but instead it swept at him like a strong and soundless, unseen river. It numbed his forehead, it became a vast and powerful thing, dwarfing the very peaks to insignificance, making the cause for which he and his dog were fighting seem of small account. So on and on into the night and to another dawn they struggled, stopping briefly to gnaw at frozen food only to be urged onward by the cold.

It was during those long hours that his fatigue, the fatigue which was undermining every muscle of his body, his nerves, his very brain, assumed proportions which when he grasped them at all, filled Ed with a startling dread. Only Mac seemed tangible in that spreading sea of unreality—Mac who plunged and staggered and fought the snow ahead.

Even before the daylight came Mac sensed that his master was acting strangely. The dull flatness of his voice, his too-frequent pauses, the vacant, purposeless glances he gave to the low peaks on either side—all these were strange in the vibrant being he knew as master. Once he came back and whined, looked over his shoulder and tried to coax Ed onward. Once when Ed laughed mechanically and sat down

he barked sharply and made him rise again. Son of a line of dogs who had mastered the wilderness, he too had known the penalty of fatigue and long exposure. And so by his vigilance and by the vitality which burned unwaveringly within him, he wheedled and led, and tried to command Ed Sibley to grapple with the dreamlike dissolution which tried to overwhelm him.

The first shafts of clear sunlight dispelled the lassitude and strange fever which had gripped Ed during those last long hours of darkness. Woefully exhausted as he was, his brain was clear, he knew where he was going and what he had to do. And late in the forenoon when they reached the first welcome band of timber Ed looked down the benches and long slopes to Beaver Falls, five miles away.

"Partner, I guess you saved my life last night," Ed told the dog as they ate a hasty breakfast. "I was all for lying in the snow and getting a bit o' shut-eye."

Mac's heavy brush waved slowly, happily, as he looked up from the chunk of bannock he held between his paws.

"And I guess you'll have to do the breaking all the rest of the way to Berkett's," Ed went on. "My legs are as much good as two sticks of water-soaked macaroni." As he spoke he was watching the wide

avenue of frozen river ten miles below the falls. That was the trail over which the man who had tried to bribe him to turn back must come. He had reckoned it all out—the two teams, even on a hard trail, should not be due at the falls until early afternoon. But as he looked he struggled to his feet, steadied himself against a hemlock and peered at the white strip far below him. Dwarfed by distance he could see two lines of moving dots.

"We got to sprint for it yet," he shouted. He forgot his fatigue-racked legs, jumped for his snowshoes and crumpled as his limbs gave way beneath him. Somehow he got up, slipped the thongs over toe and heel and, plunging and sliding, started down the steep slope ahead. After the tremendous effort he and Mac had made they would lose out after all unless he made his weary legs go on. He tried to run, staggered and only a tree prevented him from falling. Stark and towering now was the fear of defeat, the thought that Williams' suggestion that he would take this chance of getting even with Berkett might seem to have come true.

He could protest that he had tried, but always in the settlements there would be men who would say, "Oh, Sibley—well—" Then they would shrug, others would nod understandingly and so the word would go about that he had double-crossed old Devon

—had broken the code of the frontier. He could never hope to beat those two teams to Berkett's cabin —he could not travel, but Mac could—Mac could get there alone—only!

"No!" Ed cried so sharply that Mac looked at him in wonderment. "My reputation ain't worth *that*—nothing's worth *that!* I won't, I tell you!" Ed added fiercely as if in answer to some disputing voice.

By what fiendish twist of unconscious thought had such a plan ever come to him? Stark and vivid as if written against the small and sullen flame of a forest fire he could see in the words of the man who had thwarted him on the trail, an inhuman, grasping determination to reach the unsuspecting Berkett before anyone else, to trick him with wily talk. Because of that meeting Ike and Ginger were no more and Ed was positive that sooner than lose out now, Williams' accomplice would not hesitate to kill the last dog of that valiant trio. Mac alone would head straight for Berkett's welcoming cabin, could carry a message which would put him on his guard. But if the strange man could prevent him, Mac would never reach that goal alive.

Weakened and exhausted as he was, Ed tried to gauge distances and rates of travel, tried to learn if Mac had a chance of reaching the cabin before the hurrying teams. He looked far down the timbered

slopes—at the distant river trail—knew that the snow would be harder lower down—and then because there seemed to be a chance for the half-wild dog he loved, he made his great decision. His fingers fumbled with pencil and scrap of paper. . . . He pointed, told Mac what he must do. . . . He waved him on and then with haggard face and wild, fear-haunted eyes he staggered behind him in a hopeless, mighty effort to keep up.

When Mac had been made to understand he must go on alone to the cabin below he had whined protestingly, looked back at his weakened master, then though he yearned to stay with him as he had done through the bitter hours of night, he obeyed the frantic command to go. On the lower slopes the snow was set and when he reached the trail leading to the clearing he was loping as swiftly as a roving wolf. He sniffed the trail, knew that once again those enemies of the night were close ahead, but because of the agony in the voice which had urged him on he only ran the faster toward the danger ahead.

When he reached the clearing the sleds were drawn up before the door of Berkett's cabin. He slowed to a trot, looked back to see if perchance Ed was following, and when he saw he was alone he whined. There was perplexity in that whine but it carried no hint of wavering and a moment later with head up

and eyes guarded and alert he struck resolutely across the unbroken whiteness of the clearing toward the cabin which had sheltered him during that night of Berkett's absence on the trap line. Only now he was entering the camp of overpowering foes—and in his heart he knew the fearful odds against him.

Perhaps if his master were here he would call him back, but his master was back there somewhere out of sight. He had been told to go to this cabin. That was all which mattered now. He saw the two teams and their Indian drivers move off toward the timber at the far end of the clearing in search of a camping place, he saw the tall white man enter the cabin and when he got there the door was shut against him.

He whined imperatively and raked the door frame harshly with his blunt claws; he listened but there was no responsive movement inside—there was only the persuasive voice of the stranger and brief words of agreement from the man who was his enemy no longer.

Again he prodded the door impatiently with a forepaw, pricked his ears and backing off a few feet looked eagerly for the door to open for him. There was a step inside, the face of Ed's adversary appeared at the window and looked out at the big dog. Mac could not know that his appearance there had brought sudden consternation to the scheming man, had warned him that in spite of great odds Devon's

young musher must be somewhere close behind; he could not know how precariously Berkett's fate rested on the tidings written on the paper fastened to his collar.

Inside the persuasive voice continued. Mac barked harshly and almost at once the voice changed. "I'll give you six hundred cash—take it or leave it," it warned. "I've no time to waste. Oh, never mind the dog—belongs to one of my Siwashes. Yes or no? Will you sign? It's your last chance."

There was hesitation, then eagerness in the voice of the repentant outcast; there was harsh urgency in the words of the visitor. Mac caught some word of confirmation in Berkett's voice, he heard the crackle of parchment. Perplexed and tortured by Berkett's failure to respond to his signals he threw himself again at the closed door, barked almost angrily and rushed around the corner of the building.

On the banked snow beside the end window he paused long enough to look inside. Berkett sat at the table, a pen held awkwardly between his toil-warped fingers. The man he knew as enemy to Ed Sibley stood at the end of the table. There was a suggestion of triumph in his pose and to the keen-witted dog it seemed that he had imposed his will on Berkett, had conquered in some intangible way, just as he had conquered Ed Sibley during that tragic encounter on the trail. Mac saw Berkett look con-

fusedly up, saw the man raise his finger to point out a blank line at the bottom of the paper. As his full-throated bark rang out he saw Berkett look questioningly toward the window, he saw the stranger wheel toward him, with a short-clipped oath of fury, caught the glint of a quickly drawn revolver and then with Ed Sibley's last command blazing in his heart—Mac leaped. There was the crash of splintered glass, a curse from the man. Then Berkett was shouting.

"Y' lied to me. That ain't your Injin's dog. Guess I know Ed Sibley's Mac when I see him," he shrilled. "What's the game anyhow? You shoot him an' I'll—" A chair was overturned, the man spun round, lifted his rifle from the wall above the table, and covered the raging visitor. "Put that weapon on the table. Now back outa here. I ain't gonna sign till I get to the bottom of this business."

The man was outside and the door bolted before Berkett, taking the paper from the dog's collar, unfolded it and read:

> "Up the draw all in. Don't sell till you see Devon. Pulp mill goes through.
>
> "SIBLEY."

Not until then did the outcast solve the mystery of the stranger's coming. With head held high and eyes that tried so hard to flash some understanding

message to the wildly excited pioneer Mac followed him outside, heedless of the figure retreating toward the Indian camp, and leaped beside him as he started toward the first ridge beyond the clearing. Then he dashed ahead, his bark like an urgent bugle note for Berkett to come at greater speed, to hurry to the aid of the master with whom he had fought through the bleak hardships of the barrens high above. And to Berkett, trying to keep the elated dog within sight, the sunlight, the snow, the shapely evergreens were strangely bright. For as much as the reward which he knew would now be his, he valued the sure knowledge that, come what might, he still had within him the power to win and to hold the true friendship of staunch hearts that follow the Northland trails.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BREAK-UP

A MONTH after the trip in to Beaver Falls, Berkett faced the world again, a man salvaged from bitter loneliness by the great deed which Mac and Ed Sibley had done for him. And soon after the brief but heartfelt parting of the two young men, spring flowed down the mountain valleys like a cheering tide, too long delayed.

The very fact that winter had opposed it so stubbornly made its coming the more welcome. From the sidehills where the greening tree tops caught the sun, came the hoot of male blue grouse, and among the alders and vine maples of the creek bottoms the wing beats of mating willow grouse sounded like the roll of primitive drums heralding the sure defeat of austere winter. Lakes and rivers burst their ice fetters, and along the shores willow clumps were stippled with the soft grey of swelling catkins.

Snowshoes and sleds were stored and once again canoes or poling boats came into use. And since Devon had a long standing contract with an old-time river man to carry mail to Quartz Creek, Ed pre-

pared to return to his old life in the Twin Forks country.

Nor were the dogs less eager than their master for a change of scene. Though Ed had caught no hint of it, Derry, now Mac's constant companion, sensed some subtle change in the big dog he had come to know so well.

In their jaunts about the muddy streets of Summit City, the change was less apparent to the Airedale, but when they forsook the more trodden ways and entered the surrounding woods on short hunting trips of their own, Mac's altered manner puzzled him. The big dog seemed driven by some new restlessness, some urge which came not through sight or scent or hearing. Vainly did Derry run shoulder to shoulder with him, tongue dangling, eyes alight for indications of small game. True, Mac would join him as he flushed grouse or spurted after the rabbits which flitted from them so provocatively. But the sport had lost its old-time zest for the big dog, and several times Derry, puzzled, returned to Devon's cabin and left his huge partner to course the woods alone.

Only once, and that after they had returned to Twin Forks, did Mac seem like his own self.

For a few weeks after they left Summit City, Ed drove Hoskins' truck. The constant travel along

woodland roads and the truck's noisy but deceptive speed interested the two dogs. It was a game, this seeing how many side trips they could make along the way and still keep up to Ed.

Then one morning as they hunted the brush above the railway tracks, they looked down to find the truck stopped near the crossing and their master protesting vigorously at something which Danny Dundee was saying to him.

"You got your lines all crossed, Danny," Ed assured the other.

"No, I hain't. And anyhow they gotta stop worryin' my Belinda," the section man insisted, his mouth beneath the dejected wisp of moustache puckered into a semblance of angry determination. "I ain't gonna stand for it much longer—"

Ed, leaning over the steering wheel of his truck, looked at the irate man who had waylaid him with vehement gestures the moment before. "But for the luva Mike," he interrupted wearily. "How many times I got to ask what makes you think it's *my* dogs that's chasing her? Seems like folks are getting the habit of gallopin' up to me claiming Mac and Derry are to blame for everything that goes wrong. Next thing, old lady Dempster'll be saying it was them did in her goldfish. I'm fed up to the nozzle with that line of chatter."

"Just the same, I bet it's them—allus rarin' to hunt any old thing."

Ed was on the verge of vigorous and outspoken denial when the crackle of brush along the crest of the railway cutting halted him. And the next instant when he located the direction of the sound he realized the futility of further protest, for out of the tangle pranced Belinda, her dirty white flanks heaving with exertion, and hard at her heels bounded two dogs he knew to be his own. Even as the goat bunched her feet and started to slide down the loose gravel of the cut, the section man shouted exultantly at this bit of luck, this chance meeting of goat, dogs and masters which proved the truth of his assertions.

Before their master yelled to them, Mac and Derry sensed that the meeting was an unfortunate one—for them. Five minutes before they had been loping in the truck's dusty wake; then their hunting zeal had made them follow a detour. They had encountered the goat, but it was only fun that caused them to give chase. Yet there were the two men glaring up as if they had been intent on harm. Derry looked at Mac and his glance said, "Tough luck!" and Mac, looking down his nose, let his ears go limp in a way which asked, "Can you beat it?"

"Brother, somehow I've a feeling we're not wanted here. Let's barge off while the going's good." This

was what Derry tried to suggest by means of a lowered, faintly waving tail stub and a body slightly crouched in readiness for unobtrusive withdrawal.

Mac was turning to follow when a short-clipped order from below told them it was all in vain. "Shake a leg, you blighters," Ed yelled again. "Get down here. To heel, now—and make it snappy."

A crow on a hemlock snag across the right-of-way promised hope of a diversion. Derry barked at it ferociously but Mac, wise in the persistence of humans, paid no heed to the terrier's absurdly optimistic attempt to change the subject. Slowly he eased himself over the edge of the cut and slid down in the wake of Belinda who now stood, prim and with a maddeningly self-righteousness on her camel-like face, close beside her master. Derry, whose barks had hinted that if the truth were known, that confounded black pirate yonder was to blame for the whole luckless affair, felt the ludicrous position into which he had put himself, fell silent, and with ears meekly down, came sidling close behind his partner in crime.

"Hop into that truck, you pair of roughnecks," Ed ordered. Mac, leaping as easily as a wolf, sailed over the tail board and there Derry joined him after several attempts which, though unsuccessful, were

meant to show Ed Sibley that his terrier's intentions were of the best after all.

"You shouldn't let her roam all over the shop, anyhow," Ed reminded the section man. "Why don't you pasture her in the woods down by the river? That's the very best of grazing."

Dundee, now that he had so completely won the argument, forgot his previous hostility. "I did figger on that," he admitted, "but, by cricky, Ed"—and here his voice dropped ominously—"they's a bear in there. I know—I seen signs."

"Another bear—" Ed began, then stopped. So poor Danny Dundee had been seeing bears again. Almost as long as Ed could remember, Danny had been seeing bears in the woods close to Twin Forks, bears that no one else saw, bears which left no tracks —in fact, bears which existed only in his own apprehensive imagination. If only Dundee would go out and deliberately hunt a bear that haunting fear would vanish, Ed knew. But also he knew that the section man had lived so long in apprehension that nothing short of a miracle could make him consider so rash a plan. So he nodded understandingly, promised he'd keep an eye on his dogs, and started the truck up the long hill.

Danny waved, the goat bleated and Derry, lean-

ing over the tail board barked an insulting farewell to the goat who chewed her cud and eyed him and Mac with such provocative innocence.

Dundee, as the truck rounded the curve, thought that now at last he and his prized Belinda need fear no further annoyance. Secure in that belief he returned to work at the tracks while the goat, after a few tentative starts, scrambled up the bank to forage again in the brush. But Dundee was wrong, for before half an hour had passed a plaintive bleat from Belinda drew his attention to the two dogs coming toward him along the track. Derry was swaggering, boastfully exultant at having eluded his master's watchful eye; Mac, outwardly grave, pretended a vast innocence of purpose. But both dogs knew quite well that it was Belinda's mildly mocking eye and her provocative bleat which had drawn them down the tracks from the dull monotony of the settlement.

"Beat it—ya imps of sin!" Dundee shouted.

Side by side Mac and Derry stopped between the rails and eyed him with cool amusement from a distance of fifty yards. Then through one half-shut, leering eye, the Airedale told the section worker that as a funny man he was a dismal failure and the sooner he minded his own business the sooner a certain ter-

rier and his heavyweight partner would be pleased. And from behind the screen of brush above them Belinda sent them a signal—plaintive, high-pitched, exasperating in its blandness.

"You're the worst—you black an' tan devil," Dundee yelled to Derry. "Allus huntin' something. Clear outa here."

Derry glared to ask what in blazes Dundee knew of hunting. But because of the shovel which the man was brandishing, he thought it best to come no nearer. Mac, however, advanced and at a safe distance circled their opponent with the air of a dignified judge who had stepped down from the bench to examine "Exhibit A." By the hauteur he displayed as he turned away he did not seem much impressed by the evidence.

"Beat it," the section man yelled, and Mac paused in his slow stride to look back over his shoulder and regard him with as much severity as if he had committed a contempt of court. But Derry was more violent in his show of disapproval. He pranced closer and discharged a bark which sounded like an impudent "blah!" Then he looked toward Mac to ask what he thought of a person who tried to shoo man-sized dogs as if they were so many chickens. It was at that moment that the bushes at the top of the bank were thrust aside and a white, camel-like face

looked down and waggled a taunting chin whisker at the excited dogs.

So great was the delight of both dogs at what they saw and heard that for an instant they forgot the man. But they were not allowed to forget him for long. Jamming his old brown derby well over his ears Dundee charged them and as Mac and Derry bounded clear they heard Belinda bleat again. To both of them there was a sly invitation in the sound.

Mac and Derry crouched with paws spread and chins in the dry grass of the right-of-way and entreated Dundee to have another try. But he was thoroughly angry at them now. He swung the shovel with a vigor which would have been deadly had it not lacked control. Very well, if he couldn't take a joke they'd go away and leave him flat, the sorehead! With cautious backward looks they ran a quarter of a mile up the tracks, saw the chase had been abandoned, and, swerving, sought the cool shade of a stunted cedar. With wrinkled brow and lolling tongue Derry asked his partner what *he* thought of a crusty person who chased respectable dog laddies off the right-of-way. Mac, gazing steadily toward the cut hinted that he had half a notion to go back and give the blighter something to think about. Then, recalling that droll face he had seen on the high bank above Dundee, he sat down and gave the

terrier a long and questioning look. Derry didn't seem to understand, so with the air of a tolerant parent trying to instruct his stupid boy, he got up and looking over his shoulder advised the terrier to trail along and pay attention. Ten minutes later, after cautious circling, they came to a small clearing near the cut and stood face to face with Belinda. Derry sat down suddenly, grinning so that his eyes were narrowed to mere slits in his tan-colored, impish face.

Belinda, except for a trace of Nubian and Toggenberg, was almost a pure-bred goat. She had a pair of general, all-round utility horns such as Black Spike himself must have coveted. She had a scraggy, elongated goatee and a sense of quiet humor. So when she saw her two persistent acquaintances approaching craftily she pretended not to notice them until they were ten feet from her. Then she lowered her efficient horns, waggled her chin whisker and gave them the look of a philosopher—the sort of philosopher who is by no means averse to sharing in any sly joke which may be going the rounds.

Mac stood and grinned at her. He could wait for her to make the first move. But Derry, who couldn't, pranced within two yards, flirted his tail until his haunches quivered, then spoke softly to her.

"Sound your 'G,' " he barked.

"Na-a-a-ah!" Belinda complied in a falsetto so plaintive that Derry sprang back in mock alarm. Then turning to Mac he invited him to contribute a note on the bass saxophone. But the big dog, thinking of Dundee, declined to betray himself by contributing to the overture. So Derry pranced and waited to see if Belinda could furnish any other good show stuff.

Belinda ran out her long tongue, wrapped it lovingly around a twig of salmon berry and engulfed the greenery with neatness and dispatch. As she ruminated she watched the big dog, her chin whisker fluttering, her eyes a little sad, a little droll. To a human she would have resembled the comedian in a "Way Down East" burlesque; to Mac she looked like a creature that needed stirring up. But when he feigned at her she merely lowered her spikes and invited him to help himself to trouble.

Derry and Mac, having hunted much together, knew the value of team work. So while Mac held her attention Derry launched a sham counter attack which sent her scrambling to the flat top of the nearest stump. There, with all feet neatly bunched, she looked down her narrow nose and gave a soft bleat of derision. If she had chanted, "I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascals," she could not have made them more determined to oust her.

But when Mac tried to scale the stump's crumbling edge the defender wheeled leisurely and was ready to prod him back if he climbed too high. Meanwhile Derry rushed round and round the stump after the manner of the attackers who once overcame the city of Jericho. And at the height of his enthusiasm he barked. He barked loudly, challengingly, and two minutes later Dundee, almost purple with anger at the persistence of the dogs he thought were tormenting Belinda, scaled the top of the bank and came running across the cleared land to rescue her.

As soon as he barked, Derry realized he had made an error in strategy and, knowing the direction from which their foe must come, his watchful eye discovered Dundee while he was still some distance from them. One grunting yap warned Mac. The dogs looked at one another, then at the goat and began to discreetly withdraw. The spoil-sport was after them again.

When she saw the dogs edging away Belinda did an unexpected thing. Bracing her forefeet she slithered down the steep side of the stump and bleating for them not to depart so hurriedly and spoil the fun, she began to follow them with short, mincing steps, her scrawny neck held high above the bushes. Delighted with this unexpected move, the dogs slowed down, waited for her and then like two

dutiful, though amused, attendants they trotted at her flanks, guiding her farther from the safety of the tracks—and nearer to the gloom of the river woods at the bottom of the long slope.

To Dundee, fighting his way through the dense brush, stumbling over rotted logs, this seemed like the final dastardly move of the two murderers.

"The schemin' hounds uv Hades!" he panted. He bellowed for them to stop and at the sound Belinda veered skittishly and kicked up her heels with an abandon scandalous in a creature of her age.

Mac and Derry answered with an outburst of delight. This was better than they had hoped for. They even paused on the crest of the last knoll to look back toward the outdistanced man and bark their jubilation. To the clamor Belinda added her thin, flute-like note. She was enjoying herself more than she had in weeks. So when they passed inside the fringe of woods her anxious master was far behind, the luscious green stuff ahead lured her on and in demure defiance of all man-imposed rules she tossed her head and attempted to gambol like a lamb.

Derry seemed impressed by Belinda's efficient method of grasping forage with her tongue, but when he tried it on a grass blade he almost choked. He coughed croupily and gave signs of becoming unwell—most unwell. But a sneeze brought relief

and he barked gaily to announce the fact. Belinda seemed pleased, both dogs barked hilariously, and to Dundee a quarter of a mile away there seemed a note of fiendish triumph in the sound. Now, surely, they would drag her down and slay her there in the shadowy woods.

This thought spurred the section man to desperation. The fear of bears, which always made him timid of entering such a place as this, was forgotten in his mad determination to defeat the foul purpose of young Sibley's hunting dogs. He plunged toward the edge of the woods. The dogs were silent now, but a jay, squawking in the boughs above them, betrayed their whereabouts to him.

That jay annoyed Derry. He bounded a foot into the air and came down stiff-legged, then by cocking his head at a perky angle, suggested to Belinda that her new playmate was an immensely discerning young fellow. "Yah!" he yapped to the jay. "I've spotted you. Look out!"

The leap took him almost five feet into the air and the enthusiasm he put into the effort made the spying jay think he was going to also clear the twenty or more feet of distance between them. It sounded a shrill alarm and flew deeper into the woods and Derry, over-balancing, came down on the back of his neck. Belinda regarded him with mild amuse-

ment and Derry glared after the fleeing bird as if daring it to push him like that again.

But Mac, already infected with the terrier's hilarity, decided that the jay should be taught a lesson. He charged into the brush with the delighted Airedale racing at his heels while Belinda looked after them to ask the motive of this sudden sally. And then, almost before the brush stopped swaying behind them, a shrill and angry outcry came from her impetuous playmates. In business-like fashion she mounted a fallen log to crane her neck and see the reason for this abrupt change of tone.

To Dundee, now close to the opening under the big trees, there seemed no need to seek a reason. The dogs had turned on the innocent Belinda and unless he arrived within the next few seconds her blood would stain the forest moss. He saw her, was on the verge of calling, when straight ahead of him the tops of the bushes swayed violently and into the narrow opening there bounded a large brown bear.

The bear, maddened by the two dogs dodging about its flanks, considered that Dundee was a third enemy come to harry it. With a hoarse, exhaling grunt it made straight for him.

Even had he not been winded, Dundee was not fleet enough to outrun the dreaded monarch of the wilds. He wheeled, leaped over a windfall, tripped

and fell. As he thudded to earth a shout of agonized despair left his lips, then he covered his head with his arms in a last futile effort at self-defence. Now —or now—or now the brute would lunge and rend him. In the wild terror of his fate he dare not open his eyes to see where the first blow would fall on his undefended body.

But the bear did not close with him, for, to be exact, it was otherwise engaged—engaged in beating off the snarling, plunging demons who darted in and nipped its haunches when it tried to rush ahead. It sat back, aiming terrific blows first at the big Newfoundland cross then at the dancing terrier and when, by circling and indulging in the in-and-out tactics of the trained bear dog, they convinced it that it was bested, the bear decided there was nothing left for it to do but climb a tree.

Dundee, uncovering his face for one fearful look behind him saw Mac and Derry leaping beneath a hemlock. Above them branches bent and swayed under the weight of the climber and as he staggered to his feet the section man knew that only the dogs' hunting skill had saved him. He was about to make off when Derry halted him with an arresting bark while Mac, circling the tree, looked first at the bear then at the man to say that they had done their part and that now it was up to him.

But the section man's only concern was to get himself and Belinda out of the woods without delay. Though remaining at their post beneath the hemlock, the dogs were puzzled when they saw him drive the goat away. They barked for him to turn back and shoot the common enemy. But Dundee, still believing that only the sudden appearance of the bear had saved his pet, lost no time in cutting across the clearing to the section house.

Even there, however, their shrill clamor reached him. Belinda, pausing in the gate of her cramped corral, lifted her long ears and listened. She had no desire to be confined to that bit of arid ground and as her master tried to push her back she braced her feet, lowered her head, butted him smartly in the pit of the stomach and with a victorious kick of her heels ran out of the yard and started headlong across the clearing. The dogs' barks rose insistently and with a thin "Na-a-ah" she tried to tell them she would soon be back to renew the pleasing game.

To the section man this rank desertion, this ingratitude, was the crowning aggravation of a bad afternoon. Reckless now and mumbling threats he dashed into the house for his old rifle and, taking up the chase, ran valiantly to overtake the goat before she reentered the river woods. But once again he failed and when at last he reached her she was stand-

ing on the edge of the opening under the big trees. To her it seemed that Mac and Derry, barking and leaping beneath the hemlock, were staging a show for her benefit.

Not until then did Dundee realize the surpassing luck which, against his will, had brought him with a rifle straight to a treed bear. It looked like a safe shot, of their own accord his arms came up, the rifle butt nestled against his shoulder and then with a deafening roar the shot rang out and the bear, limp and harmless at last, thudded to the ground.

Not even the hilarity of Mac and Derry could express his triumph. He who for years had shunned bears had miraculously brought one down. "Boys-oh-boys!" he shouted. "I've up an' done it!" And then exultantly he snatched his old derby from his head and dashed it to the ground.

"That's the stuff t' give 'em!" yipped the dogs and, because a hat in motion was better than a moveless bear, they threw themselves upon the wreckage. They fought for it and when at last Derry had the rim and Mac the battered crown they romped joyously about Belinda. Derry laid the rim tantalizingly before her and with a swift thrust of her horns she crowned herself with it. "I'm to be queen of the May," she seemed to bleat, and when Derry tried to recover the prize she dodged nimbly; he gripped it

and she swung him clear of the ground then posed before him, inviting him to have another try.

To Dundee this was the most amazing happening of an amazing day. "Ye pair of rogues," he cried. "So it was fun y' was after all the while? An' me thinkin' y' was out to kill her!"

As he stood beside the body of his fallen foe Belinda bleated at him and flicked her tail in confirmation of this discovery, Derry pranced, and Mac, bounding at him with the last shred of the hat crown in his great jaws, prodded him with a foreleg in eloquent invitation for Dundee to make a partner in this merrymakers' foursome.

CHAPTER XV

STRAINING BONDS

JULY came, the swift Northland summer wore on, and still Ed worked at the garage. During that time the last link of the road connecting Division with Twin Forks had been completed. Adventurous motorists from the larger town persisted in using the rough highway and as a consequence Hoskins had more repair jobs than he could handle alone.

"Better stick the summer out with me, young fella," the old-timer advised. "Business'll slack off come fall, then y' can hit the trail again."

Ed laughed. "I got no kick against earning real wages, Sandy," he replied. "If me and Andy are going to extend our trapline this winter we'll need a bunch of money to outfit. Guess I can stick it in town if the dogs can. Derry seems satisfied, but Mac there—the old lad seems suffering from the itching foot."

"Like his master, heh? He'll get used to town bye-n-bye. After the travellin' he's always done, it's natural he should feel a bit fed up at times. Let him range 'round. Can't hurt him. 'Tain't like he was a scatter-brained pup that'd make up with other

men. You're the only person, white or Indian, I've seen him so much as look at."

This, Ed thought with secret pride, was true. Visitors from Division, tourists who occasionally stopped off the Limited for a few days' visit in this genuine frontier town, even some of the settlement's old-timers, had tried to win the dog's friendship. But Mac had kept himself coldly aloof.

The high-spirited Airedale might romp with them as a means of employing an idle half hour, but the big wilderness dog repulsed every kindly advance. Without resentment, but with eyes utterly devoid of warmth, he might permit some of these strangers to lay a hand upon his head before he moved off, either toward the surrounding woods, or to lie down on the heap of sacking under Ed's work bench. For most of the summer his interest was shared evenly between the out of doors and his young master. Then, early in September, even Ed's hold on him seemed to lessen, and he spent whole days roaming the scrub timber of the nearby hills and shaded draws.

Derry was the first to notice the change, and as at Summit City that spring, it worried and perplexed him. Though the big dog often seemed indifferent to his presence, the terrier would follow him on these disturbing excursions, not to share in what sport they might find, but as a shadowy guardian, vaguely

apprehensive of losing his companion. Town bred as he was, Derry could not understand the insistent, half-felt desires which were tugging at Mac's heart; desires that had their roots far down in the past, and which were in no way dependent upon man.

For, comradely though they were, a vast gulf separated Mac's past from Derry's. To play and work with humans, this was the instinctive desire of the terrier who from the very first had known the touch and scent of humans. But for Mac, product of the wild, no such inborn bond existed. Ed Sibley had attracted him, had won his allegiance in the face of his half-wild instinct for complete independence. That bond had never been broken since those first days in the upper Kitamette country. But now, because of the little voices of the wild which called increasingly to him, it was a bond stretched perilously near the breaking point.

Perplexed and troubled, Derry would follow his big companion throughout a day's tireless wanderings, only to return infallibly to his master when evening came. But more than once Mac, cold to the terrier's persuasive attempts to lead him back to the settlement, remained in the woods throughout the night.

When this had happened the third time, Ed knew that something must be done.

"He ain't like a town dog, Sandy," he confided to his employer. "I can't tie him up at home. He'd get loose somehow. And anyhow, it would break the old duffer's heart. Reckon it's about time I headed into the hills again."

"Mebbe," Hoskins admitted.

And as if aware of Ed's determination to get out of town, Hughes dropped off the train at the Forks that week, went straight to the Comet and offered Ed the sort of work he longed for.

"You know that Kitamette River as well as I do, son," Hughes told him as they lunched together at the Forks stopping place that day. "I need somebody to keep an eye on that river system for me. Can't go myself, what with egg collection on the Twenty Mile Creeks in full swing. How about it?"

"Suits me down to the ground—and then some. What's the work?"

"The Kitamette salmon run is dangerously light this year. But if we can be sure all the fish that passed the mouth have reached their headwater spawning grounds, we can feel safe about the river. But if there's a barrier somewhere—a log jam like the one you broke last year for me—and the fish are hung up, it'll be bad. Nobody's been in there all summer, not even the Indians."

"I travel by water then?"

"Yes. Drop down to Twenty Mile. Bring your outfit. I'll furnish you with a good one-man poling dugout. Can you make it by Monday?"

"To-morrow if you say so. Business is about over at the Comet. Sandy can handle the works himself now, easy."

So it came about that the following day Ed loaded his worn pack aboard the train, saw Mac and Derry safely into the baggage car and took the train east to the settlement at the mouth of the lake system which led to the Kitamette River.

The next morning he and the dogs were on their way.

"Headed back to your home country, Mac, old son," he laughed at the dog who splashed abreast of him in the shallows. And not until two weeks later could Ed know how instead of allaying it his return to the upper Kitamette had intensified the big dog's strange unrest.

CHAPTER XVI

LITTLE VOICES OF THE KITAMETTE

The long shadows of the spruce trees stretched out across the moonlit river, trembling where they lay upon its moving surface like palsied fingers vainly trying to gather in the silver liquid which flowed eternally down the silent valley leading toward the broken North Pacific coast.

In the air of that autumn night was the vibrant magic of the changing seasons and as Mac stood on the gravel bar, from high above the mountains whose tops were already crowned by the first snows there came down into the undespoiled valley the eerie clanging of migrating geese—sounds which were high-pitched and eager like the voices of a host of phantom children fleeing southward through the night. Mac waited and when his master came out from the campfire and joined him the pair stood startlingly clear on the moon-washed bar like figures set to represent the comradeship of dog and man. Derry drowsed beside the fire. But even at that moment Mac was hearing again the little voices of the wilderness, the insistent little voices which called

him to go forth, alone—back into the wild whence he had sprung.

All day while Ed poled his high-prowed dugout canoe through pools and over glinting riffles, Mac had heard these voices calling him. But he could forget them then, could splash with the Airedale through the shallows to spread panic among the schools of salmon lying there, could course beneath the evergreens in search of game. Then as they made camp, the sun—like the leader of an army—had drawn his forces from the deep ravines and basins five thousand feet above the river, had taken his shining outposts from the more exposed places and the day had marched down into the west leaving only rosy beacons on the slopes of snow. The first pale stars came out, the moon rose, the night hush spread across all that splendid, lonely land and then in Mac's heart the little voices spoke again and could not be denied. Rover of solitudes that he was, he had been born with a consciousness of the allure of these vast spruce forests along the Kitamette, and to be here during these few vibrant days before stern winter swooped filled him with a longing sharp as pain.

He watched Ed Sibley go to the end of the bar which the moon was stippling with a myriad points of light, saw him draw the canoe farther from the

water and from long custom knew that the time for turning in had come. Yet unlike Derry for him there could be no rest beside a man-made fire that night. He loved this master with whom he had shared keen days and magic nights beneath the stars, but deep within him was a growing power more compelling than love, and as Ed came back to him his head sank lower.

"Time for a bit o' shut-eye, old boy," Ed said. "The canoe's all snug for the night."

At the word "canoe" and Ed's glance toward the dugout in the shadows before them, Mac's ears lifted, his interest seemed to turn to the things about him, to be directed toward practical matters. With something of the air of a kind but firm parent he looked inquiringly up at Ed and then toward the canoe. Immediately Ed understood the query.

"Asking me if I've forgotten anything, eh?" Ed chuckled. "Say, you must of learned that trick from my aunt. I can just hear her sayin', 'Edward, are you *sure* you've left nothing? Think, now.' Next thing, you'll be wanting to know if I dried behind my ears. What a nerve." Suddenly Ed lunged at the big dog and tried to upset him on the sand.

Sometimes it seemed to Ed that Mac took a secret delight in practising this useful trick he had taught

him on the trail the previous winter. By purposely leaving some article of his outfit behind and then, after asking the dog if he had "left anything," sending him back to sniff about the camping place, Ed had placed a check on his own none too methodical habits. Sometimes Mac returned with some useful object, quite as often he showed up proudly with a thing which Ed had purposely discarded. Once, throughout an entire mail trip to Quartz Creek Ed had tried to get rid of a pair of worn-out moccasins only to have Mac insistently root them out of every hiding place.

"Still thinking I've slipped up again?" Ed went on.

Mac gave him a steady and none too complimentary look, then stalked out to the canoe. Ed heard him treading on the loose paddles and the wooden baling scoop. "You'll draw a blank this time," he chuckled, as he heard Mac's paws crunching softly on the pebbles as he came back to him.

But Ed was wrong. Clamped tightly between his jaws Mac trotted up to him and then with a look of utter disgust at his master's thoughtlessness he dropped a small cotton bag at Ed's feet.

"Say, auntie," Ed began as he picked it up. The sack contained assorted buttons, needles and stout

thread, various pieces of cloth and other oddities which might be needed for repairs to clothing on a strenuous trip. His aunt always insisted that he take it with him when he went into the mountains. More than once Ed had tried to leave it at the house in Twin Forks but Mrs. Morris always corrected that intentional oversight.

"Can't I get rid of that sewing-circle spare part?" Ed demanded, laughing, but Mac merely warned him by a glance that he should be more careful next time.

"All right, I'll take it," Ed agreed and carelessly stuffed the bag in his pocket. "Let's call it a day. Derry's getting his shut-eye already," he went on. "If we're to make headwaters to-morrow we'll need an early start—at that we'll have to dangle. Come on." He laid his hand on Mac's head and the dog's tail wavered faintly in response.

For a long moment they stood there, Ed with his hair rumpled and the collar of his mackinaw upturned, Mac's muzzle low as he tested the lush scents the moving water drew off the forest floor.

"Come on, old memory hound," Ed called back as he started for the fire inside the fringe of timber. "That night air's bad for a motherly old soul like you when you haven't got a shawl. See, I'm layin' the mending outfit beside the brush bed where it'll

be handy in case I want to do a bit of hemstitching in the night."

Mac paid no heed to his master's feeble wit. For almost half an hour he stood there while in his heart a strange, fierce fight was being waged between his loyalty to his master and the wild instincts which had never more than slumbered in him. It was here in this vast valley of the Kitamette that he had come as a mere puppy, it was here he had fought with the Indian dogs, which like his Siwash master had long vanished. Still this was his home. Deep in his spirit the forest scents, the peaks serene in their isolation, the river sounds, each had left its imprint. Here he had met Ed Sibley, the first white man he had ever known, and from here he had fared far through the North; but now he was back again and all the impressions of his younger days were singing their song of rebellion in his heart. Once he looked appealingly toward where Ed and his Airedale partner in many a high adventure slept, and a yearning whine—a whine for help—came from him to mingle in the river's drowsy night song.

No answer came from dog or man who always before had stood beside him in times of trouble. He waited, listened longingly and then lithe and silent as a wolf he vanished among the evergreens to face his last great fight alone.

On the thoroughness with which Ed Sibley made his lone patrol of the headwaters of the Kitamette there depended more than even that experienced outdoor man knew. Ed knew that when the Pacific salmon spawn once they die and if, because of overfishing in the inlets off the river mouths along the coast, or because of a preponderance of natural enemies, the great runs are depleted, the headwater spawning beds become too scantily seeded, too few young salmon hatch and, with tragic suddenness, river systems which as far back as the memory of the Indians go, have yielded bountiful catches, are rendered barren. That fall the Kitamette was faced with such disaster.

On his long trip up the river Ed had thought much of Hughes' parting words. "The Kitamette salmon run's in your keeping, Sibley. Do your best."

Do your best. Every day Ed had thought of those words and of the trust they implied, and next morning as he knocked together the embers of his campfire and under Derry's exasperating supervision put his frying pan on the coals, he reminded himself that to-day would tell the tale. So far the river was free of obstruction. If he found none to-day it would mean he could take back word that the Kitamette run would survive, that the river had not been rendered barren for posterity. Now, more

than at any other time since he left the settlement two weeks ago, he felt the dramatic quality of his mission.

"We'll get the low-down on this old river to-day," he said to Mac, who, strangely silent and unresponsive, sat at the edge of the camping place and watched him. Derry, who had slept the sleep of healthy fatigue, knew nothing of Mac's wandering far from camp as the jet-black shadows and the intoxicating whiteness of the moon drew him far through the forest where once he had roved unfettered by bonds of affection and loyalty for any living thing.

That morning Mac did not stay close with Ed while the canoe was being loaded. Usually he followed Ed's movements at such times, trotted beside him on each trip between canoe and camping place and, after the manner of a bland but officious superior, stood by to see the outfit stowed away. His grinning mouth and his head tilted at a waggish angle always showed he appreciated this bit of pantomime. But now, while the first spears of daylight pierced the river midst, he seemed to have forgotten such drollery.

Not until Ed was pushing the canoe out and Derry was exploring the bank ahead did he seem to rouse to a sense of his usual responsibility. Then he cir-

cled the camping spot, turned over the boughs of the bed with his muzzle and as Ed was heading the canoe into the current he gave a sharp bark which meant, "Wait!" as plainly as if it had been spoken. A moment later he stood at the water's edge. In his mouth was the forgotten sewing kit.

Ed plunged his pole to the bottom and edged in shore. "What a dog you'd be—for a feller in the junk business," he laughed as he took the little bag aboard. Then, standing up, he edged into the fast water and started round the bend.

After Ed and Derry had gone from sight Mac stood beside the drenched embers of the fire, the last fire he might ever share with the youth he had so superbly served in the wilds and in settled places which were alien to him. Roaring fires of the winter trails, glowing coals that cooled and tinkled like fairy bells on many a summer night, he had shared them all beside the Northland's clear streams, on its mountains and beneath its giant evergreens. But now there had come the call which his untamed spirit could no longer ignore. Wheeling slowly, his eyes clouded with mute appeal, he looked up river toward the bend and then was gone.

Ed, pausing above the turn to roll up his sleeves for his tussle with the next fast riffle, looked to see if Mac was near Derry, abreast of him on the bank.

He examined the edge of forest and the sloping banks but nowhere did the big dog stand grinning at him.

"The old lad's actin' kinda queer," Ed thought. Since he wakened at dawn Ed had been vaguely puzzled by some change in Mac the meaning of which he could not define. Only when he came with the forgotten sewing kit had he seemed like his old joyous self. Almost unconsciously Ed had been dwelling on this subtle change but his preoccupation with the work which lay before him, his feeling that the next twelve hours would tell the tale, had prevented closer study of this dog whose comradeship meant so much to him. He whistled. Derry alone responded, and the timbered sidehills threw the sound of his call, thin and futile, back to him.

Mac never knew of the growing fear which made Ed reluctant to go on. He could not know of what old-timers had said among themselves. "Ed don't need to think he's got that Mac dog tamed," they had predicted. "When the time comes to leave, he'll quit. That wild strain gets 'em all."

All that forenoon as Ed, standing on the low platform in the stern of the native craft, poled his way over swift riffles and up the narrow pools, he fought against his increasing consternation.

"The old dog—him an' me's been through too much—he just couldn't pass me up now," he tried

to convince himself as he looked ahead for the sight of Mac standing on some exposed bar waiting for him. But at every turn the banks beyond the canoe's arched bow-piece were empty of the form he sought. At noon he went ashore. Only Derry greeted him and without taking time to light a fire, Ed ate a hurried lunch. As soon as it was finished he started on.

"He'll drift into camp to-night, mebbe," he told the Airedale. "An' when he does, I'll get the leash onto him and keep it there till we're out of this. Prob'bly he'll fight against it but I ain't for taking any more chances of losing him."

Several times that afternoon he nosed the dugout into a back eddy and sounded the shrill whistle to which Mac had always rallied. But only Derry's answering bark drifted back to him. No great black and white form came bounding through the brush to greet him. Somewhere in the unblazed solitude the big dog went on alone.

That afternoon when his two weeks of dangerous travel brought him to his destination and he saw before him the long stretches of river bottom, the loose gravel smooth as a floor under the clean mountain water, and the salmon already spawning on it, he knew he could take back the word which Hughes was eagerly waiting for. He knew he had succeeded in the task assigned him and yet, because of Mac,

he found little satisfaction in the fact. Late that day when the unsettling magic of October dusk again lay over that unblazed valley he and Derry made camp.

CHAPTER XVII

RENUNCIATION

A DOZEN times that day Mac, following a game trail high up the side-hill, stopped with ears lifted and forefoot in air to listen to the thin thread of sound which reached him from the valley bottom; and each time he recognized Ed's whistle or Derry's questioning bark his ears drooped and a look of troubled doubt came into his eyes. Once from a high ledge he looked down two thousand feet and saw the black shape of the dugout, small as a toy, toiling up a constricted channel where boulders shredded the water to vivid whiteness. He knew he should be down there, just as he knew he should come in answer to the rallying whistle, but he was on a trail his feet had known in youth, a trail which led to a well-remembered hunting ground, and in his heart was an urge which went far deeper than any man-imposed law.

He turned and followed the alluring trail and that afternoon his muzzle knew the feel of warm, wild flesh once more as after a clever stalk through mountain ash thickets, he tore with savage relish the body of a grouse. Standing there among the scattered

feathers he crunched the slender bones between his strong molars and looked down the steep slope. The waning sun sent its mellowing light on the undersides of the wide spruce boughs and at that moment a subtle transformation came over him. There was a more guarded alertness in his limbs, a glint of challenge in his eyes as he watched to see that no other four-footed hunter came to dispute possession of the kill. This was the mode of life to which he had been reared.

At sunset he followed a deer trail down to water. Before passing under a windfall that spanned the trail, some sense which came not by sight or scent or hearing made him stop. He looked up and saw the tawny flank of a cougar crouching on the log. His ruff rose, his ears flattened and the mountain lion glared spitefully at him. Its tail coiled angrily about its haunches and then as he began to circle it bounded noiselessly away. Mac marked the place, then went on down the trail. Sometime before the dawn the cougar might make its kill here and he could come back and drive the slayer from the clean red flesh. After many months of sojourn in the alien camps of men this all seemed natural again. His guilty doubt at leaving Ed lessened under the spell of the old, unfettered ways and the little voices sang more persuasively in his heart. No man, except

perhaps Ed Sibley, could have safely laid a hand on him at that moment. And yet, when dusk had deepened into night and he stood beside the river, he was thinking of Ed Sibley and his camp farther up the stream.

Once he heard distant sounds as Ed's axe bit into solid wood. Once Derry's bark reached him. With ears lifted and body inclining tensely forward, he listened as if apprehensive of the least of these accustomed sounds escaping him. Then the faint tang of wood smoke came down to him, drawn by the movement of the water. Between him and the camp a coyote yipped tauntingly and instantly Mac started forward. Like a slinking ghost the prowler withdrew but Mac went silently on until he saw the red glow of the fire between the straight trunks of the evergreens. Without conscious purpose he hesitated on the edge of the circle of dancing light, fascinated by the familiar scents which were wafted to him, held there by recollections of such camps he had known in other places. Unexpectedly a twig snapped but instead of retreating Mac stood there, knowing Ed's eyes were on him.

Then softly, crooningly, Ed was speaking to him. "Mac, old lad, you aren't going to quit me—I know you aren't. They said you would—the old Indian I got you from told me you'd go wolf one day. I

didn't believe him—I don't now. Come on, Mac, come here and see me—come on—"

Slowly, with seeming nonchalance, Ed was getting to his feet, moving indirectly toward him with leash and collar in his hand. And Mac, knowing Ed's purpose, found himself held there by the voice which as always gained a power over him which he could neither combat nor understand. But because he was a half-wild thing he wanted to fight against this as against any other force which held him. A shudder as if of pain passed over him as Ed slipped the collar about his neck, he felt the buckle snap and, head and tail eloquent of abject misery, he stood there—a prisoner!

Squatting in the swaying light of the fire Ed threw his arm over Mac's shoulders and tried to comfort him. "It'll be all right, old partner. It'll soon be all right. To-morrow we ride the river to the settlement. We've done a good job here, you and me and Derry. You'll soon forget this Kitamette country."

Neither by a glance nor by any movement of head or tail did Mac indicate that he had heard. Derry eyed him in perplexity. For days two loyalties had been in conflict within him, forces greater than himself had swayed him and now he stood like a creature stunned, bewildered by what he could not understand.

That night, tethered to a sapling, he faced away from the dying fire and lifting his muzzle gave voice to his travail of spirit in a long-drawn cry that went throbbing to the snow peaks high above the valley. Derry, his shoulder muscles trembling nervously, watched him in apprehensive silence.

There was no sleep for Ed Sibley that night. The camp where he had thought to celebrate with Mac and Derry their victory over the vicious Kitamette became instead a place of black misery for him. He read the tragedy in that long, quavering cry, understood its supplication and despair. At dawn Mac refused to even look at the food he offered him. He turned away from Derry's friendly advances and at sight of the big dog's haggard eyes Ed knew he must face the great renunciation he had dreaded all the night.

He went to him, lifted the great forepaws and placed them on his shoulders in the way he had so often done in other days, then fondling Mac's ears in what he knew was a long farewell he told him of the decision he had made.

"Mac," he said gruffly, fighting down the hard lump in his throat, "when you followed me outa this valley you came because you wanted to. We've been in some tight places together—you an' me—we've been *tillicums*. I thought all along I could get the

best of that wild streak—but now I know I can't. You've played the game with me—now I'm goin' to —play it—with you." With a gesture which was savage in its intensity he unbuckled the collar and, dropping Mac's paws to the ground, turned quickly away and started to pack the outfit.

Half-an-hour later Mac stood on the crest of a high cutbank and watched the river hurry the dugout away. Ed was standing, Derry poised in the bow. The raw face of the bank was patterned by a thousand pointed shadows laid in its depressions by the rising sun. A straggling flock of golden-eye ducks which Ed had flushed passed above Mac on whistling wings but he did not see them. In the full glow of the new day he stood there, the monarch of this far-flung lonely land, a chieftain giving farewell to an ally at whose side he had fought but with whom he was now parting. He saw the dripping canoe pole glint in the sunlight, saw Ed turn and hold his battered felt hat aloft in a poignant gesture of farewell. Derry barked a yearning invitation. And then the river turned sharply and the man he had once owned as master was swept out of sight through the gigantic gateway of the evergreens.

For a long moment Mac watched the empty river. With forehead puckered and ears delicately lifted he stepped forward until his front paws were curved

over the edge of crumbling earth. Then he turned away toward the heavy timber, hardly slowing his gait as he approached the abandoned camping place.

He circled the dead fire and was trotting over the spot where Ed had slept when a tell-tale scent reached his nostrils. He swerved without apparent purpose and there before him lay a familiar thing—the little bag which his master of other days seemed to always be forgetting. He stopped and stared hard at it. Lowering his head, lifting each foot and putting it down with great care he moved warily forward until he stood over the bag. He watched it and sniffed again as if it had been something which had been left there to trap him.

And at that very instant Derry, the dog he had loved and fought for, sent a last, lingering, poignant call up river to him.

Suddenly a bark was torn from Mac. He leaped at the little bag, snatched it, raced along the top of the bank, found a gully and plunged down it to the river. Through every fibre of his being a burning purpose flamed. He splashed through the shallows, swam the riffles and with water streaming from his haunches, climbed the bank again and raced downstream. In that homely sack, in every piece of cloth which bore some well-remembered scent of clothes Ed Sibley had worn there was a message his great heart

could not resist. Derry's thrilling message still sounded in his ears. For him both were symbols of his former glad comradeship, tokens of the half-understood moods of spirit which held him to Ed Sibley and the Airedale. Stilled forever now were the little voices of the Kitamette, annihilated was the rebellious wild thing in him and he was a dog, ready to forego all to stand beside and serve his master.

There was wild exultation in the reunion which took place on the bar below the river's bend and as Ed wrestled with the creature who threw himself upon him in the ecstasy of its delight, he could not find words to frame all the things which were in his heart. Derry hurled himself at both of them in riotous delight. Even when at last Mac bounded into the canoe and they set out on their swift voyage down the Kitamette, he could only say: "I knew it—I knew it all the time!"

But then as the fast water bore them on, a slow grin wreathed his lean, tanned face. "Mac," Ed began, "I got a little confession I should make. That bag of sewing gear you've been shoving at me steady for the last month—mebbe I forgot it when I broke camp this morning—and then again mebbe I didn't. Anyhow it's powerful bait for a dog with a heart like you—that and Derry's bark. What you think?"

Mac's forehead puckered as he tried to under-

stand. Then he barked riotously. To him Ed's words meant nothing. He only knew they spoke of the vast delight which was singing in his heart, and as he turned he grinned back at his master then sat upright, shoulder to shoulder with Derry, in the bow —a valiant pair who were Ed Sibley's guard and lookout—as the river swept the three of them on to face the world—together.

THE END